

THREE RECENT TABERNACLE CHOIR RECORDINGS

Lowell M. Durham

The Mormon Tabernacle Choir's Greatest Hits, Volume II. Columbia Records, Stereo MS7086, ML6486.

Anvil Chorus. Columbia Records, Stereo MS7061, ML6461.

Symphony No. 9 (Chorale) in D Minor, Op. 125. By Ludwig van Beethoven, Philadelphia Orchestra and Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Eugene Ormandy, conductor; soloists: Lucine Amara, soprano; Lili Chookasian, alto; John Alexander, tenor; John Macurdy, bass. Columbia Records, Stereo MS7016, ML6416.

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While the Tabernacle Choir's total output of albums annually may be less than that of some orchestras, no classical recording organization approaches the Choir's sales per album. This may be attributed to three factors: the Choir's sizeable, continuing radio audience; a decade's fortuitous collaboration with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra; and a repertoire of unusual breadth. As a result of the change in radio since the advent of television, the Choir's far-flung radio audience has been on the decline for some years, following its amazing climb to world renown. The fact that many CBS Radio outlets no longer schedule the Choir broadcast could reduce its recording sales. However, the present head of Columbia's classical division once noted that any Tabernacle Choir album sells from one to two hundred thousand copies even before advertising. The two best-sellers (*The Lord's Prayer* and Handel's *Messiah*, both with Philadelphia Orchestra) are presently en route to their "second million."

The Choir's profitable collaboration, both financial and artistic, with Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra ended in December, 1967, when "the World's Greatest Orchestra" stopped recording for Columbia. Many Tabernacle Choir members and staff have expressed deep concern. One insider moaned, "The Choir can't compete by turning out only 'Mickey Mouse' albums!" He was referring to the discrepancy between such masterworks as *The Messiah*, Brahms's *Requiem*, and Beethoven's *Ninth*, on the one hand, and "pops" and variety albums on the other. The Choir has made considerably more of the latter.

Some of the "variety" discs are good musically and justified by other considerations (for example, most of *The Lord's Prayer*, I & II, *Joy of Christmas*, *Beloved Choruses*, I & II). Patriotic albums are certainly appropriate in these times and are played profusely by the nation's radio DJs. But all the foregoing albums — masterworks or variety-type — are with the Philadelphia Orchestra or New York Philharmonic. Without a major orchestra tie-in, the Choir's recording future could be less distinguished than its past.

In the meantime, the final Philadelphia-related recordings reach the market. In quality, the three recent albums fall into three distinct niches. *The Mormon Tabernacle Choir's Greatest Hits, Volume II*, is a compilation from several earlier albums. All selections have been taken from the original tapes,

none re-recorded. This is one of the recording industry's favorite remunerative devices. *Greatest Hits, II*, is a mixture of patriotic arrangements, Negro spirituals, folk songs, and oratorio excerpts. All are conducted by Ormandy except "Dixie," "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," and "This Is My Country," which are done under Richard P. Condie's direction. Performance is good, but choice of repertoire leaves something to be desired: Handel's "Largo" ("Holy Art Thou") is uncomfortably sandwiched in between "Dixie" and a Negro spiritual. There seems little correlation between Handel's "Hallelujah Amen!" and Foster's "Beautiful Dreamer." There's no lovelier tune than the latter, but it belongs in a Foster folk album.

Anvil Chorus is one rung up from *Greatest Hits* on the musicality ladder. Purists would probably never take it out of the album cover. To them, opera is theater and should be recorded "live" and not excerpted. Nevertheless, this album affords opera lovers (rather than experts) opportunity to hear big moments from popular operas. Columbia engineers achieve a glorious sound. *Cavalleria Rusticana* ("The Lord Victorious"), *Tannhauser* ("Hail, Bright Abode"), and *Aida's* "Triumphal Scene" are standouts. Musically, the performance is fairly good, but except in rare moments it is impossible to understand the text (English translation). This often occurs with large choirs. However, other Ormandy-conducted recordings have been much better in this respect.

Some excerpts seem to be included for inclusion's sake, for instance, *Pagliacci's* "Bell Chorus" and *Butterfly's* "Humming Chorus." Thrilling though *Faust's* "Soldiers' Chorus" and Wagner's "Pilgrims' Chorus" are in staged performance, they lack the brilliance of the ladies' voices as a purely audio experience. Also weak are the familiar Wagner "Bridal Chorus" and Weber's "Huntsmen's Chorus" (from *Der Freischutz*) — not weak as performed in the actual opera, but weak by excessive repetition on this disc.

Ormandy's (Beethoven's, that is!) *Ninth Symphony* is the latest and fifteenth available recording. The Choir, of course, appears only in the fourth movement. The *Ninth* may be bought separately or purchased with the complete set of Beethoven symphonies. Being the "greatest," Beethoven is also the most-recorded composer. There are eleven recordings of the Complete Beethoven Nine Symphonies still on the market. It will be interesting to see how Ormandy's fares. He is preeminent in the late Romantics. The voluptuous Big Sound of the Philadelphia lends itself to his emotional approach to music. He cannot be outdone in Wagner, Richard Strauss, Tchaikovsky and the Russians, Sibelius, and — even — Ravel.

His Beethoven's *Ninth* is extremely good; for the late Beethoven is fifty years ahead of his time. Part of the *Ninth's* secret is the Big Sound, deep emotion bordering on genuine passion, and a huge choir capable of enduring the physical punishment and sustaining the emotional tension demanded by the Bonn Master. The 375 voices, with their magnificent sound (and the engineering skill of Columbia's engineers, plus ingenious tape-patching by Columbia's artistic staff) combine in one of the best *Ninth* choral performances since Toscanini nearly three decades ago. The Robert Shaw Chorale did a mag-