

Technology Invigorated Yesteryear's Classics

By JOHN ROCKWELL

The biggest news in classical recordings during 1983 was neither music nor musicians but technology — the arrival of the compact disk. Most of the actual CD releases were of performances issued a year or two earlier on LP. Hence they had already been candidates for previous best-records lists, and the actual technology is more Hans Fantel's concern than mine. Still, for many record collectors, a greater amount of time and money than usual was spent on technological questions — and on reexperiencing the standard repertory in a new medium.

First new, then old: While the disks I will discuss here are predominantly new releases, the recording industry was active in its rereleases, as well. Recycling recent material from the vaults seems more a matter of economics — shoring up the bottom line at a time when the major American companies, especially, were loath to embark on too many risky new studio sessions — than of music. Still, there were some notable reissues, among them Seraphim's four sets, toward the end of the year, of performances by the young Arthur Rubinstein. But the Rubinstein albums are really a different sort of venture than standard vault reissues for commercial purposes.

The Rubinstein albums really count as what might be called "notable historical recordings." There are two kinds of reissues of this sort. One is the recycling on LP or cassette of 78 r.p.m. disks. Here, the prize of the year goes to the In Sync/Conductart series, mostly orchestral performances from the late 1920's and early 1930's lovingly reproduced as truly superb-sounding cassettes.

The other kind of historical reissue is that which used to be the purview of the high-

minded pirating, but which now is coming more and more into the open — especially with the changes in European copyright laws. That is the appearance on LP of radio broadcasts or in-house monitor tapes. Here the prize was the reissue on Fonit/Cetra, as part of its generally laudable Furtwängler Edition, of the complete Wagner "Ring des Nibelungen" from La Scala in 1950 (FE 37/40, 18 disks). This performance had been available before on LP, but never in such good sound.

Turning now to new releases, we begin at the beginning of Western art-music with a really seraphic disk called "A Feather on the Breath of God," which consists of sequences and hymns by the Abbess Hildegard of Bingen (Hyperion A68039). The abbess died in 1179, but her music is just now coming into wider public knowledge. The performances are as rapturous as the music, with the Gothic Voices under Christopher Page and featuring that most virginally ecstatic of English early-music singers, Emma Kirkby.

Still in the pre-Baroque period, Josquin Des Pres's "Missa Pange Lingua" received a scrupulous yet imaginative and polished performance from the Boston Camerata under Joel Cohen, coupled with five of Josquin's Motets (French Harmonia Mundi HM 5119).

It was one of the notable trends of 1983 that Baroque and Classical works already recorded by more contemporary forces enjoyed new accounts that proved the musical validity of the latest musicological notions by sounding musically superior to the conventional competition.

For instance, Miss Kirkby can also be heard as Dido in a fine, authentic version of Purcell's "Dido and Aeneas" with the Taverner Choir and Players under Andrew Parrott (Chandos 1034, heard in the compact-disk release, CHAN 8306). The spare yet poetically telling accents of this performance, not to speak of Miss Kirkby's plaintively folkish singing, make richer-sounding recordings seem overstuffed.

Even more striking is the set of the Bach Suites for Orchestra by La Petite Bande and Sigiswald Kuijken (Pro Arta 2PAD-205, two disks). These scores have been so often recorded that one might think it impossible to shed new light on them. But Mr. Kuijken and his forces do just that, and also illustrate their scholarly ideas and make entrancing music at the same time.

But the star of the early-music field in 1983 was John Eliot Gardiner, who, with his Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists, released an amazing number of first-rate albums. The most striking of this large lot was Rameau's last opera, "Les Boréades" (Erato STU 715343). And it should be mentioned that the French Erato

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