

RECORD RENAISSANCE

By GAMA GILBERT

THE rapidly growing popular interest in good music is nowhere more strikingly indicated than by the current renaissance of the phonograph as an instrument of the home. A nation's appetite for good music grows by what it feeds on. An unprecedented number of artists are touring the country; radio is broadcasting the classics oftener than ever before, and the more this music is heard by Americans, the more they wish to hear it. One result was that last year they bought 60,000,000 records and about 370,000 radio phonographs.

The figures are down in black and white, but the industry can hardly believe them. After a ton of bricks has fallen on a man, you can't expect him to understand immediately when his rescuers tell him his rich uncle had died. The recent history of the record industry is a little like that. Radio and the economic hurricane of '29 brought it under the very shadow of doom, where it lingered in '32 and '33. A few years later most people had regained their financial equilibrium, learned from the radio the profound values of good music, and turned back to records for the music they wanted to hear again and again.

The result is that old record firms swept the cobwebs from their factories, engaged a small army of artists, re-employed workmen and shouted their jubilation in newspaper ads. Other firms, who had given up the ghost, were revived by magic springs of gold. New, large enterprises arose and many small ones found profits in special fields. Phonograph concerns, large and small, came into existence with models costing from \$15 to \$1,500. An industry was reborn.

The classified telephone book tells the story at a glance. Record distributors and manufacturers take some three and a half columns in the latest directory. Five years ago they could be squeezed into a stick of type. You'll find swanky retail shops multiplying on Fifty-seventh Street and Park Avenue and among the cut-rate bazaars on East Fourteenth Street and in Yorkville. Records don't gather much dust in these places, for the public is buying almost as fast as new releases can be turned out and old ones re-pressed.

THE recording industry has done its best to deserve such a welcome, and its efforts have benefited the industry, the artists and the public. Big-name musicians have increased their following and incomes by means of records; lesser-known artists of special fields have found their scattered public unified in its demand for their records; some artists have been introduced in America on records, and serve the public exclusively through them.

Composers have played and directed their own music on wax, settling the interminable rows about "composer's intentions." Several small concerns, catering to sophisticated tastes, have recorded ancient and modern music that doesn't pay in the concert halls. Scouts have trailed through the Southern backwoods, poked about in frowzy dives and sat through the services of village churches, Holy Roller revivals and strange, quasi-religious rites, hunting unknown forms of Americana.

The increasing public interest shows itself in many ways. In thousands of homes an evening's concert on records—the program suited to your taste—is becoming a habit. Petty gossip gives way to the discussion of music, of artists, of performances. Youngsters chat of pick-

ups, amplification, bafflers, vibrations, frequencies, with the glibness of scientists' shoptalk. Arguments concerning the qualities of a needle can swallow an evening. As for music itself, no collector of records need be told the first subject of the second movement of the Third symphony of Beethoven. Radio companies who broadcast the performances of live musicians find a listening public for broadcast records, and several manufacturers sponsor radio programs of records—their own, of course.

ONE of the incidental joys of records is in their collection. To get down to a basic plane, a record is a thing, and the urge to accumulate things is in the blood of every human. If the pride of possession operates even in respect to things that are left to the attic spiders, how much more will it operate when the object of collecting is a permanent record of a fine musical performance by an admired artist?

The collecting bug has a bite for which there is no cure, and collectors of pipes, walking sticks, door knobs, keys and wigs are frank in the solicitation of the outsider's indulgence. "There is really no excuse for this," they admit, "and it's entirely useless; but it's one of my eccentricities."

Now, a record collector needs no such indulgence, for the world grants him respect as a lover of the noble art of music. He may track down fifty performances of Isolde's Love-Death by as

many singers without incurring the risk of eccentricity. He can, if he has the money, put his name on the mailing list of every major record company and buy all their releases, no matter what, and still be regarded as a connoisseur. He can't possibly get the time to hear them all, and yet he will be judged an expert in all music. He is reduced to using all the wall space in his house, storing records in the coal bin, and eating off an album of Mozart's "Figaro," and yet he can retain his reputation for sanity. He may neglect his wife and children, and still be regarded as the pillar of society so long as he donates his 109th record of the "Tannhaeuser" Overture to the orphan's home. (He has a duplicate of it.)

One of the most famous collectors in the country is William Hatton Green of West Chester, Pa. "Bill" Green is tired of being asked how many records he has; he says he doesn't know. He hasn't really been collecting many years. He's 80 years old, and the bug bit him when he was in his late fifties; but he bought everything. A teacher of piano and a conversant musician, he tries to hear everything he buys—but it's hard. Bill wasn't discouraged, but people started saying that his father before him used to collect canes with the same passion. Then one day a West Chester citizen came to Bill with an idea: Why not give free concerts in the park, using your records amplified? Bill jumped at the suggestion, and offered his collection at once. A whole community is grateful now to Bill Green.

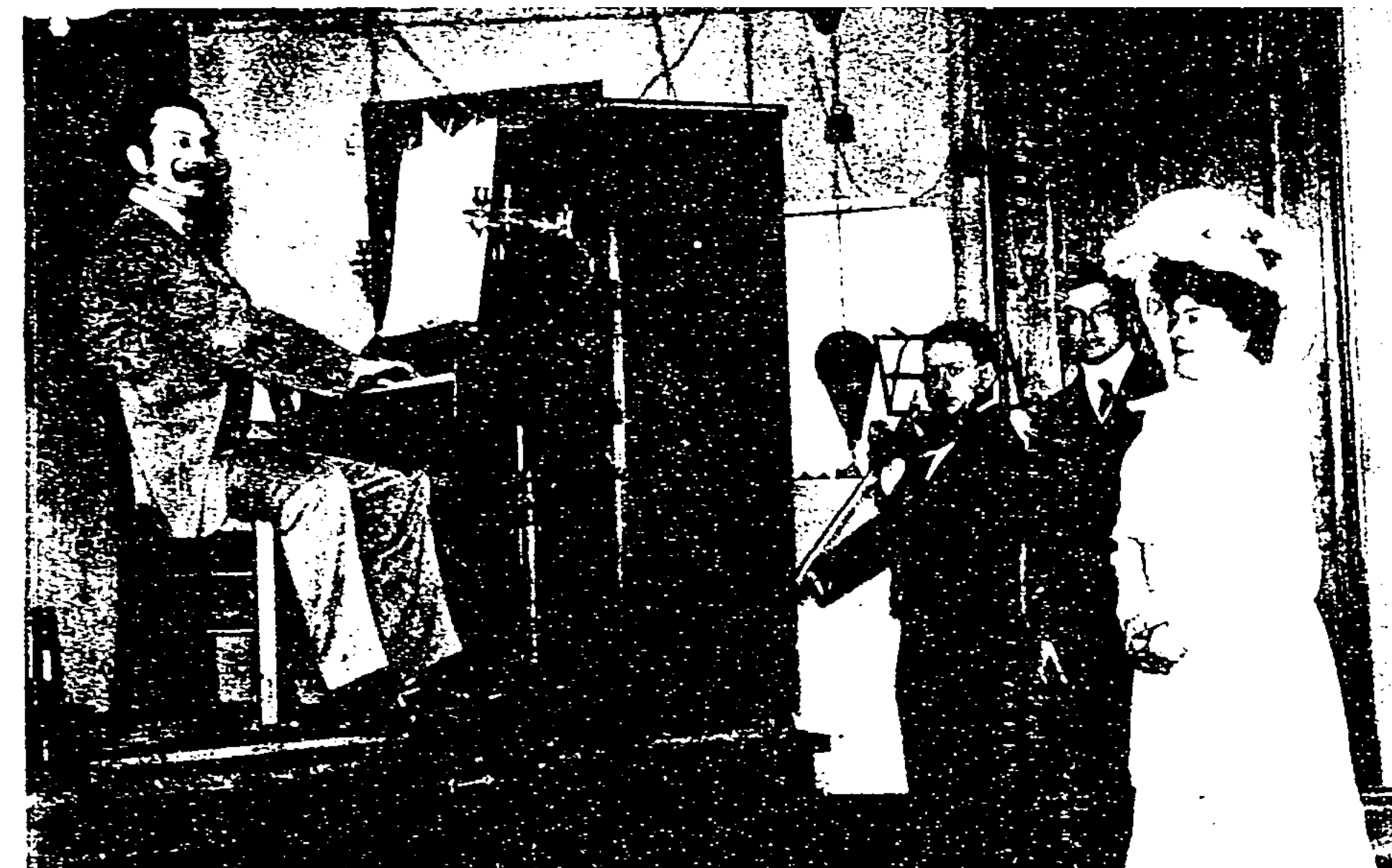
DESPITE its numbers, the species of record collector has no very long history. The industry may be said to have been established in the early Nineteen Hundreds, when Caruso made his first record. As far back as 1877, Thomas Edison applied for a patent on a phonograph, and on its scratchy cylinders were etched the voices of such notables as Queen Victoria, Edwin Booth and P. T. Barnum (who was possibly reflecting on a well-known proverb of his). Curiosity induced Johannes Brahms to play one of his (Continued on Page 17)



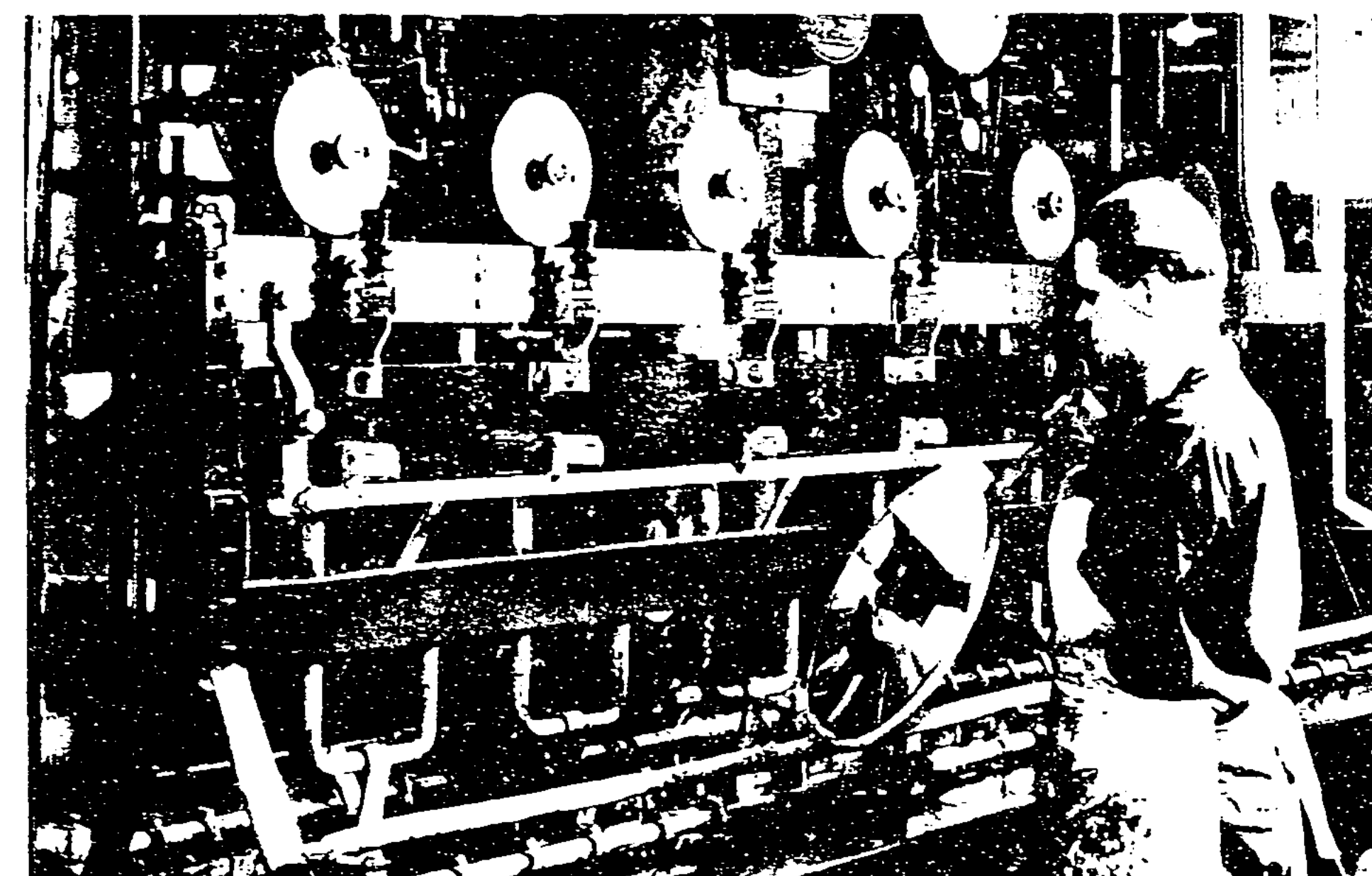
The early phonograph amazed listeners at the Paris Exposition of 1889.



A family of the Eighties gathers for a playing of Edison's invention.



Around 1900, opera singers like Melba had their voices recorded.



Today big factories turn out 60,000,000 records a year for Americans.

C. S. Reinhart in Harpers Weekly from T. F. Healy, New York Public Library, Culver and RCA Victor

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piano pieces into the little tin horn, and record fans are still searching, like knights for the Grail, for a reputed record of the legendary Jenny Lind.

The first real impetus to the industry was the invention in 1896 of the disk and the process of repressings from a matrix. It did not, however, immediately convince the public that it was anything more than a passing novelty. Amy Ellerman, the contralto, tells of a tour in which her traveling companions were a machine and a set of records of her voice. She sang an aria upon an empty stage before an innocent backdrop; then suddenly the house was darkened for a few seconds, the voice continuing through the blackness. When the lights went on, Miss Ellerman had disappeared, and in her place stood the box and horn singing the aria. It was a convincing stunt. Within the next few years all the famous voices of the "golden age" of song had been put on commercial disks. Even Adelina Patti, then in her sixties, fell to the lure of the machine that was brought to her castle in Wales.

In the East Side second-hand shops you occasionally come across one of the antiques that used to bring these voices to the late-Victorian parlors of the land. Its principal attractions for the eye were the full-blown horn of oak or mahogany, a cabinet to match and a shining crank. The voices came as from a great distance on a slightly windy day, and the piano accompaniment sounded like a worn zither.

One of these prewar records has become a collector's item because it hides—or so they say—a precious line. Caruso, coming late to a recording appointment with Geraldine Farrar, excused himself by saying that he had stopped at a bar with an old friend. Farrar was perfectly understanding of the emergency; but present owners of that day's record—a duet in Italian from "Madame Butterfly"—invite you to hear Farrar scream in an impassioned measure: "He's had a high-ba-aa-ll!"

THOUGH it was far from perfect, the early phonograph did bring a satisfying approximation of the world's greatest voices to thousands who could not afford an opera ticket. When the unsightly horn was hidden within a handsome large cabinet, the phonograph took its place in the home on a doubly esthetic basis. With technical improvements, the violin, the piano solo and later the orchestra began to appear on records.

In the late 'Teens, records offered the Chicago Symphony and New York Philharmonic. The modern-minded Leopold Stokowski ventured to put on disks two Hungarian dances of Brahms, and by 1921 even Toscanini entrusted himself and the La Scala Orchestra to records in two movements of a Mozart symphony. In those days, if you were patient, perseverant and affluent, you might assemble all the movements of a symphony, each



Thomas A. Edison at the time he invented the phonograph.

by another orchestra and conductor. You could never hope to collect more than a few war-horse arias of the standard operas.

By the mid-Twenties, the repertory was hugely extended, the roster of artists listed every noted name. More important was the arrival of the recording microphone with its radical improvement. The industry was fast approaching an annual production of 100,000,000 records, and Americans had spent \$2,000,000,000 on records and phonographs in the first quarter of the century.

At the very peak of these halcyon days came radio. At first glance, the novelty and wonder of its achievements, its obvious mechanical advantages over records, its utter convenience and simplicity, its inexhaustible bounty of music and entertainment from the free air—these seemed sure to doom the phonograph and records to the museum.

THE educative function of radio is now so generally credited as the main factor in the phonograph revival that it is hard to appreciate the gloom of the phonograph industry when the radio avalanche descended. Most manufacturers doubted that records would ever come back; but those whose money was deeply tied up in stock and equipment could not afford to luxuriate in self-pity or morbid speculation. For them it was a do-or-die situation.

They set about making vast improvements in fidelity of tone, mainly by electrical recording and amplification, and they designed the machine in many handsome styles. As radio seemed bent on stuffing the twenty-four hours with anything a microphone could digest, the phonograph people shrewdly exploited the idea of "what you want when you want it." After the public's first initiation to music came the inevitable desire for selection according to personal taste; and this was the need that records could and did fulfill.

Although the biggest business is still in jazz, the most important, manufacturers agree, is in the classics. The devotee of serious music is apt to be a sober fellow to whom fine music is one of the good things in a naughty world—one of the things, to be specific, on which he feels it worth while to spend money. As good music never lets a fellow down, a music lover once is a music lover always. Upon this human and indestructible fact the record industry feels it can build a lasting structure with a real function in society.