

Scottish Gramophone Group

October 26

On a lovely sunny afternoon 18 of us gathered chez Prenter to be invited by Peter Chaplin to take our "Hats off to Coates" . Using state of the art CD equipment Peter ensured that no valuable shellac discs were harmed and without too much enhancement brought out a beauty in the acoustic orchestral recordings which I have to admit my gramophones cannot.

We learned that Albert's two strengths were the Russian repertoire and Wagner - the former because he was born in Russia and lived there till aged 12, the latter after taking conducting classes with Arthur Nikisch in Leipzig and following a career as conductor in German opera houses until 1914. When he resumed his career in the UK with the LSO he went on to introduce many Russian works to this country and to record a great deal of Wagner for HMV. A revelation to me was that he also composed 6 operas. These are no longer performed but 'Pickwick' was given at Covent Garden and was the 1st opera to be broadcast by the fledgling BBC television service.

Coates recorded for Columbia [12/19 - 03/21] and Decca [1945] but the main output was for HMV [10/21 - 03/32]. He began with the western masters and was heavily criticised for using too fast tempi, being dubbed the greyhound of conductors. Peter's hobby is transferring recordings from 78 onto CD to a professional standard - some of his tracks have been commercially released - and he went to a great deal of effort to prepare comparisons between Coates and other conductors for us. The most impressive was a part of the 3rd movement of Mozart's Jupiter Symphony split into 8 sections alternating between Coates [1923] in the even sections and Walter [1938] in the odds. As we hopped from one frequency to the other I mused that Peter must have a picture of Hedy Lamarr in his eyrie. Other comparisons similarly spliced were with Wood, Weingartner, Ansermet, Jordan and Coates himself. He managed his electric Ruslan and Lyudmila Overture 22 seconds faster than his acoustic version and a whole minute faster than Jorda. Whatever the western masters might think as they turn in their graves, it was the Coates that set my feet tapping.

The examples of his Russian and Wagner recordings showed him in his element and adopting slow tempi if required, especially for the opera singers. Leading Wagnerian soprano, Florence Austral, named him as her favourite conductor. Two excerpts from Goetterdaemmerung illustrated his skill :- the really beautiful shimmering strings over horns in the Fire Music and Austral in the finale.

When the fat lady has sung it's time to go. As we stepped back into the Scottish Daemmerung we needed neither hats nor coats for, to paraphrase the music hall song, "the sun shines bright from Peter Chaplin".

Billy Gray