

Walter Terry

## An Alonso Gala

**A**licia Alonso is a member of a rare species—prima ballerina *assoluta*—one of only three or four that are on view today. It was my honor to be her guest at the Seventh International Ballet Festival held under her auspices, and those of the Cuban government, in Havana last fall.

Miss Alonso, just turned 59, found a new Albrecht for her *Giselle* in the USSR's Vladimir Vasiliev, very probably Russia's finest male dancer.

Alonso has danced the title role in *Giselle* for 37 years, and the list of her distinguished partners includes England's Anton Dolin, who first taught her the ballet in his own staging of the classic for the American Ballet Theatre. Today, despite the obvious gap in her own age and that of the teenage *Giselle*, Alonso, in this Havana performance, accomplished what only a handful of great dancers and actresses have done, and that is to reveal the inner radiance and emotional urgencies of youth through the clear perspective of maturity and the ecstasy of remembrance. Dolin, now 76, was present to watch her performance with Vasiliev. His rapturous verdict? "Sheer magic."

I doubt that it occurred to any one in the cheering audience to say of Alonso, "Not bad for a Cuban Communist." For although she is that, to her public she is so much more. In her person, talents, and indomitable spirit Miss Alonso embodies the transcendent quality of the arts over the narrow and transient arena of politics. To her, these International Ballet Festivals are a celebration of the "oneness" of the family of dance.

In recent years, petulant politicians have not stood in the way of Alonso's appearances in the U.S.—previously

she was barred for almost 15 years—nor of Americans participating in the International Ballet Festivals in Havana. Now, at the 1980 festival held late last year, it was exciting to see the One World of Dance back together again so joyfully.

Dancers and choreographers, musicians and critics, dance photographers and ballet documentarians came from the United States and the Soviet

ing day. Ichino could speak only English; Jhones, only Spanish. But they could both speak through the language of ballet, through the easy eloquence of movement. Since their versions of the old Marius Petipa classic varied in several places—it would have been perilous if she had leapt into his arms only to discover too late that he was elsewhere on stage!—they had to reconcile their differences. This they did easily with a gesture here, a bit of pantomime there, many tactile touches on arms, chests, thighs, shoulders, plus a great deal of the mysterious (to the outsider) sign-language whereby dancers can literally dance whole ballets with their hands and fingers.

Occasionally, of course, the spirit of international exchange through dance is stifled by socialist bureaucracy and fears of defections. Soviet ballet, for example, despite the considerable talents of the Bolshoi's Grigorovich, is patently 50 years behind the times because the country's young choreographers are not permitted to work and study extensively outside the Soviet bloc. Even Cuba, despite Alonso's remarkable example of artistic freedom and courage,

has not allowed its most gifted choreographers, among them Alberto Mendez, to work, observe, and learn in the richly creative atmosphere of North America.

But such considerations only slightly marred this artistically stirring and warmly human Seventh International Ballet Festival. Throughout, the indefatigable Alonso devoted herself, as she has done since the beginning of her illustrious career, to the care and well-being of her extended family—the dancers of the world. ■



Alonso with Vasiliev in *Giselle*.

Union, from socialist Czechoslovakia and the Kingdom of Denmark, from Venezuela, Mexico, Great Britain, and indeed from around the world.

The Americans, Eleanor D'Antuono, veteran ballerina of the ABT, and Paul Russell, the foremost black classical dancer of today, performed with Cuban partners to thunderous applause from the audience. When the California-born Yoko Ichino and the Cuban Fernando Jhones "knocked 'em dead," to put it in show-biz terms, with *Le Corsaire*, it was delightful to recall their fast-paced rehearsal of the preced-



# RECORDS

Stephen Wadsworth

## What Is Digital?

**T**hey gave you the horn. Then they gave you 78s, LPs, and stereophonic sound. Quad came and went. Now there's digital, the latest step—though far from the last—in the ongoing purification of the recording process. With computer technology, recording engineers can eliminate some of the distortion inherent in the old analog system and produce records much more faithful to the original sound source, with deeper deeps, brighter brights, louder louds, and softer softs.

Sound is variations in air pressure. During recording, disc manufacture, and home reproduction, these variations are converted and reconverted numerous times—from electrical signals in the mike to magnetic patterns on the tape to positions in the record groove, eventually back to air-pressure variations in your listening room. Every conversion compromises the fidelity of the final reproduction.

Analog recording makes a comparatively rough model of the original sound by turning it into magnetic impulses (analogous to the original) which, because of the nature of the process, are vulnerable to imperfections. Digital recording *describes* the original sound in greater detail by encoding it into a vast procession of numbers (digits) representing tiny pulses, the component elements of the sound. It should be noted, however, that the digital releases on the market now are not digital discs; they are performances digitally recorded and released in the analog format.

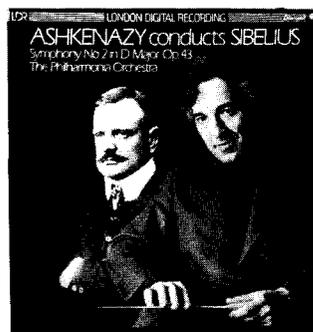
Vanguard's series of digital/analog comparison discs allows listeners to evaluate a single performance recorded

by both methods. Johannes Somary's spirited but unpolished run-through of Haydn's Symphony No. 100, with the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra, sounds slightly more natural and free on side one (digital) than on side two (analog). But I'd still go for Leonard Bernstein's old analog version (Columbia) or Neville Marriner's (Philips). I prefer a snappier performance to an "improved" sound that is only arguably better than Philips's high-quality analog results.

Similarly, Deutsche Grammophon's new analog disc of Ravel's *Rapsodie Espagnole*, with Carlo Maria Giulini

Louis Orchestra, proves Mata the musical victor and Telarc the digital victor. In fact, if there were such a thing as a digital cake, Telarc would take it. For brilliance, presence, and spaciousness, and for clean surfaces, which seem as rare on digital records as on analog ones, Telarc's new recording of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* scores high. It never seems to be the recorded sound of the Cleveland Orchestra (under Lorin Maazel) that we hear, it's more like the orchestra itself.

Another convincing music-technology balance is struck on London's new digital release of Sibelius's Symphony



No. 2, an arrestingly beautiful performance. The Philharmonia Orchestra plays richly for Vladimir Ashkenazy, who brings the same honesty and classical line to conducting this irresistible work as he does to playing a Mozart piano sonata. Fine digital sound is, in this case, just another reason to buy a good

record. So are the liner notes, which explain digital recording more clearly than anything else I've read.

There's still no such thing as a perfect record. There will always be quality-control problems—until, perhaps, all stages of recording, disc manufacture, and home reproductions are digital. And that's no dim possibility, because the digital idea is an irreversible fact of our scientific lives. For now, however, digital doesn't necessarily mean better (though it does mean more expensive, with list prices up to \$20 per disc). In any case, music, not technology, will always be the point of records. ■

leading the Los Angeles Philharmonic, is a better recording of the work than RCA's digital version with Eduardo Mata and the Dallas Symphony. Mata is a strongly appealing conductor, and his intense performance is caught with admirable clarity by RCA, but, as Giulini says of *Rapsodie*, "too much intensity is fatal." Giulini gets exquisite shape and shimmer from his players, and DG's analog sound is only slightly fuzzy at climaxes. On RCA's flip side, Mata does brilliantly with Ravel's *Bolero*—a perfect display piece for digital's strengths, from hushed beginning to exhilarating noisy end.

Comparing two digital *Boleros*, RCA's with Mata and Telarc's with Leonard Slatkin conducting the St.

Stephen Wadsworth, former managing editor of *Opera News*, contributes articles to many musical publications here and abroad.