

# 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.

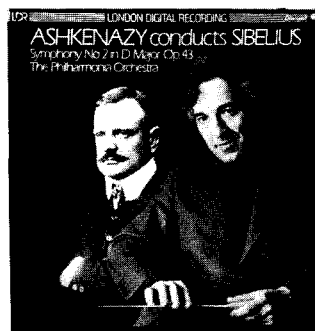
Vanguard's series of digital/analog comparison discs allows listeners to evaluate a single performance recorded

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.

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pb. .... Paperback  
qp. .... Quality Paperback

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## SR Competition No. 16

It completely escaped what for want of a better word we like to call our mind that this competition passed its first anniversary some little while back and is now well into a second year of uncalled-for silliness. Since the day when our trembling fingers tore open that first envelope, our respect for our contestants has grown by quantum leaps, whatever that means. But there must be a limit to excellence. We have therefore decided to set the *ultimate competition*. So: send us your version of an *SR* competition, complete with intro (see above), rules (see here), and prizes (see below). The three winners will receive our usual munificent \$25, and if we should actually *use* one of the competitions in a subsequent issue, the author will be paid at contributors' rates. Have fun.

Entries for Competition No. 16 must be received by February 6 and the winners will be announced in the April issue. Send submissions to *SR* Competition No. 16, *Saturday Review*, 150 East 58 Street, New York, N.Y. 10155. All entries become the property of *SR*.

## Winners of No. 13

We asked you to invent the opening line of a novel and supply the name of the book and author. Before getting to the pleasant part of this report, we must ask those of you who faint at the sight of violence to turn aside. Will the contestant who thought we would not recognize "I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of all" as the *real* first sentence of Beckett's *Malone Dies* come to the desk and hold out his palms this instant. Yes, you.

There. Otherwise, reading the entries was enormous fun. We are glad to see that "the duchess," who enjoys a certain impolite fame among connoisseurs of opening lines, is still kicking, throbbing, panting, and manifesting other signs of a generally bawdy life. A remarkable number of hilarious entries were unprintable in this family journal. Is the opening line now in competition with the limerick as a vehicle for ribald wit? We have never seen it, but there must be some classical example involving an accident with a washing machine, since in three separate entries the three parts of the human anatomy

least mentioned in these pages got caught in the wringer. Right. Those three.

As proof that our efforts are read by persons of tender years we need go no further than the numerous pooled entries that arrive from high school English classes. The first prize, in fact, goes to Scott Franzen (age unknown) of Ms. Rosalie Fisher's creative-writing class in the St. Joseph-Ogden High School, St. Joseph, Illinois. Never in living memory has the word "unfavorable" been so deftly used. This is the opening of Kari Crab's *The Crab Creature*:

The creature arose out of the frantic sea with a furious rage clutching the flushed-faced girl with his evil paws, and with great intensity pulled her beneath the unfavorable waters.

Second prize to Elizabeth J. Seaton of Springfield, Oregon, who must be one of the numerous devotees of our colleague Middleton. This is the opening of *The Hospitaled Fury*, by Verba Liza Nouné:

She medicined the patient, attared the room, and healthized the situation, or so she thought.

Third prize to Dr. J. Edwin Culbertson of Monroe, Louisiana, who wins not so much for the entry itself as for the story behind it. This is how Chapter I of *Here's to Him*, by Edwin Culbertson, starts:

When my great grandfather, Dr. E. Poe Harriss, married his Cherokee Indian wife she was a Wolfe; so was grandpa and remained one until he died in 1896.

Fact is, this is the actual beginning of a book Dr. Culbertson is writing about his ancestor, who sounds like a darling man. His Uncle McGuffy (*the McGuffy*) brought him up to be a preacher, but he found relief from his own hell-fire sermons by "private communion behind the church" with the prettier members of his flock. McGuffy sent him to medical school. Dr. Harriss married three times, "once for love and twice for money and tribal membership." His blond hair reached his waist, he snorted coke all his life, once shot a cardsharp and, undressing him to treat the wound, found his clothes full of aces and kings. Over his finally dead body his last wife said, "Well for once I know where he'll be tonight and that he'll be alone!" We can't wait for the book.

## Puzzles

### Wit Twister No. 173

Edited by Arther Swan

*The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash with a blank corresponds to a letter of the word.*

As ————— of bright coral inward turn—

As greying ————— within still hotly burn—

So, timid hearts may glow when ————— grown thin,

Yet hide that ————— of autumn love within.

With self-made —————, they seal their eyes from bliss

And ————— lips shut, though longing still to kiss.

A.S.

### Literary Crypt No. 161

MYTH-GUMBLAYER UM PLEY

TUNYTR WL WINY STIBY ... UX

WOY HUBWULX BITTYG HUB-

WULX WOIX UX WOY HUBWULX

BITTYG ICWLFULVEISOR.

QYMMIPRX ZYMW

Answers next issue

## December Answers

### Solution to Wit Twister No. 172

Vera, aver, rave

### Solution to Literary Crypt No. 160

This will never be a civilized country until we spend more money for books than we do for chewing gum.

Elbert Hubbard

### Middleton Double-Crostic No. 202

(BARBARA) TUCHMAN:  
MANKIND'S BETTER MOMENTS

In human activity the invention of the ball may be said to rank with the invention of the wheel. Imagine America without baseball, Europe without soccer, England without cricket, and Italians without boccie, China without Ping Pong and tennis for no one.

From the *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 1980