

Stephen Wadsworth

A Guide for the Smart Buyer

The *Schwann Record & Tape Guide*, a monthly catalogue distributed through record dealers, lists recordings that are “generally available through retail record stores in the United States.” But *Schwann*’s listings are arbitrary and incomplete. What good reason can there be to omit such important and widely available labels as Supraphon and Hungaroton (the state-run labels of Czechoslovakia and Hungary), English EMI, and German Harmonia Mundi, to name only a few? *Schwann* has served the business well and still has its uses—it is, after all, our *only* catalogue—but there is a need for a guide that serves both market and public realistically. There are works and performances available on record that you and your dealer should know about—perhaps half again as many as *Schwann* lists.

Like the book business, the record market in America has a bit of a blockbuster complex. Record outlets don’t want to keep a lot of merchandise around; many offer only what’s on *Billboard* magazine’s Top-Ten lists, which means a never-ending rhapsody of Luciano Pavarotti and multiple versions of the Pachelbel canon. Most aren’t likely even to order, much less to stock, non-*Schwann* records, and some feel that special-ordering anything at all is a waste of man-hours. Shopping for records in Smalltown, U.S.A., can be extremely frustrating. There will always be lovingly tended specialty shops, but if you can’t find one, consider a superbly stocked mail-order outlet (André Perrault, Ltd., Old Stone House, 73 East Allen Street, Winooski, Vermont 05404; catalogues, \$5.70); or a leading distributor of non-*Schwann* imported recordings (German News Co., 220 East 86 Street, New York, NY 10028; catalogues \$2.50); or both.

Do not fear imports. They constitute a world of artists, performances, and pressings that in many instances outclass *Schwann* offerings. Qualiton

Imports (39-28 Crescent Street, Long Island City, New York 11101; catalogues free) has recently released, on Supraphon and Hungaroton respectively, fine recordings of Bohuslav Martinu’s six symphonies and Karl Goodmark’s opera, *The Queen of Sheba*; there is only one Martinu symphony in *Schwann*, and no Goldmark opera. Qualiton has also made available, on the Swedish label Bis, a 14-disc series of Grieg’s complete piano music; here Bis offers about eight hours of music not listed in *Schwann*, and the performances and pressings rival any record of Grieg piano music *Schwann*

“Schwann” is arbitrary and incomplete. Buying by mail can bring you superior value.

does list. German News carries, on German RCA, German EMI Electrola, and English EMI, superior pressings of many performances available on the unreliable surfaces of American RCA and Angel.

And imports, while their technical quality is invariably higher and their packaging more attractive, are not necessarily more expensive than records listed in *Schwann*. Wilhelm Furtwängler’s historic *Tristan und Isolde* with Kirsten Flagstad, a five-disc investment, costs \$49.98 (suggested list) on Angel’s frequently defective surfaces—and only \$39.90 on EMI Electrola’s immaculate virgin vinyl. (One drawback: the import *Tristan* has no English libretto. About 25 percent of the imports I’ve heard this year have no English liner notes.) Sometimes, of course, imports *are* more expensive, but you can always hear why. Two

recent mid-priced domestic labels, Quintessence and Pro Arte, feature many performances that are available for less than half the list price of German Harmonia Mundi and Supraphon, but the budget pressings are less than half as good. The tapes jam, and the records snap, crackle, and pop. Is this a bargain?

If you want top value for your money, be very wary of Angel Records, whose poor pressings—so often full of hiss and other insidious manifestations of low-fi—can spoil marvelous performances. Angel’s digital recordings don’t measure up either. American RCA, which for some time produced virtually unplayable records, has a promising new imported-pressings line and some good-quality digital releases, but much of their line sounds mediocre, and, again, some of the performances are available—sometimes cheaper and almost always higher-fi—from German News or through the Perrault catalogue.

So what’s good in *Schwann*? In the last year or so CBS has made technical strides, better to serve their artists and their public, as has Nonesuch, technically the most advanced and, thanks to an enterprising catalogue, by far the most interesting of the so-called budget labels. The most reliable “generally available” labels are Telarc, the technically pristine digital pioneer, and the divisions of Polygram Classics—Deutsche Grammophon, Archiv, London, Telefunken, L’Oiseau Lyre, Argo, and Philips. They are all pressed and produced in Europe with great care and consistently rank with the best records made. The Polygram labels maintain the best balance of great performance and great sound.

The moral of the story: Use *Schwann*, but be aware of its inadequacies. For a marginally greater expenditure of time (and sometimes money) you can treat yourself to the best the market offers. ■

BOOKS



JACK KIGHTLINGER-THE WHITE HOUSE

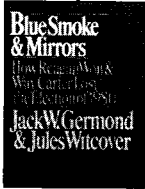
Germond and Witcover, shown above meeting with President Reagan, argue that the press does not neglect the issues.

A Backstage Look at Campaign '80

Blue Smoke and Mirrors: How Reagan Won and Why Carter Lost the Election of 1980
by Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, The Viking Press, 322 pp., \$14.95

Reviewed by Jeff Greenfield

EVER SINCE Theodore H. White's *The Making of the President, 1960* taught Americans that the backstage drama of a presidential election is as fascinating as its visible pageantry, political reporters have spent more and more of their time detailing the strategies, battle tactics, and game plans (choose your favorite metaphor) of the campaigns. Pollsters, media advisers, political consultants, and other tacticians have, at times, crowded the candidates themselves out of the official chronicles—to



say nothing of the realm of ideas and policies that are often treated as mere window-dressing for the technician.

It is a measure of what happened in 1980 that two of the best-known reporters of campaign tactics repeatedly emphasize that the 1980 presidential election was *not* decided by "the new political technology." In 1980, Jack Germond and Jules Witcover write, "unforeseen events were so decisive, compelling, and uncontrollable that they overwhelmed the professionals' efforts to shape and confine the

presidential campaign." Coming from the authors of a syndicated political column which often reports politics hour-by-hour and straw-poll-by-straw-poll, this is roughly equivalent to an admission by Hugh Hefner that young male magazine readers are not all that interested in sexual mechanics. It is, nonetheless, both a perceptive observation and a telling indication that the 1980 presidential campaign was fought out on the terrain of political substance, not tactics.

To be sure, *Blue Smoke and Mirrors* displays a fondness, if not passion, for the intimate detail, the backstage maneuver. We learn that President Carter was eating a turkey-and-ham club sandwich aboard Air Force One on Election Eve when he got the news from pollster Patrick Caddell that he would lose. We learn that Carter changed back into a blue suit when he dashed from Chicago

Jeff Greenfield comments on politics and media for CBS News. His new book on the media and the 1980 presidential campaign will be published next spring.