

Listening To Popular Music

RCA informs us that its Living Strings series is at an end. There will be no further releases. It has been a while since the last and we had long since resigned ourselves to only two or three a year, and those often compilations of earlier Strings and Living Voices tracks. Some of us remember when we could look forward annually to nine or ten. Yet while we miss the Living Strings we will take this opportunity to celebrate them as a cultural phenomenon, put their output in perspective, and pay respect to their achievements.

Launched in 1959 by producer Ethel Gabriel as RCA's answer to the surprise budget label success of David Miller's 101 Strings on Somerset/Stereo Fidelity, the Living Strings over twenty-two years brought us a fine-sounding and well-nigh comprehensive studio orchestra survey of the world's greatest popular music on the company's lower-priced Camden and, more recently, the parent label to the tune of over a hundred LPs. Recorded primarily in England, but also in Mexico, Italy, and the U.S., they constituted the initial and central ensemble in a "Living Stereo" instrumental stable that would grow to include the Living Guitars, Living Voices, Living Brass, Trio, Jazz, Marimbas, Percussion, even Living Banjos and Living Disco.

Gabriel it was who cunningly sold George Melachrino's Strings and Orchestra to the American public in the 1950s as desirable life-enhancing aids to relaxing, dining, studying, daydreaming, romance, travelling, even building "courage and confidence". With the exception of 1963's Music To Help You Stop Smoking compilation her Living Strings titles make no such claims but tell us only what we can expect to hear - timeless standards, international favorites, current pop and country hits, music (sometimes "all the music") from the latest movies and Broadway shows. And hear them we did, on our home stereos and on beautiful music radio stations, where they quickly established themselves as a vital programming element, throughout the country. The Living Strings was, and remains, the most consistently musical and satisfying of all the budget label orchestras. Their best is on a par with the fine work we have come to expect from the great "name" orchestra leaders - Percy Faith, Mantovani, Andre Kostelanetz, Paul Mauriat, etc.

Each Living Strings release is well-conceived, well-arranged, well-performed, well recorded and mixed, and eminently listenable. While most lack the commanding presence, high style, and brilliance of the "name" ensembles, they succeed in avoiding the languid lushness of Jackie Gleason's orchestra, the emotional distance and sometimes pointless virtuosity of John Gregory's Cascading Strings, and the hasty clumsiness and often disturbing fussiness of the 101 Strings. Their virtues are intelligence, balance, and an affecting communicativeness that renders them especially enjoyable, even the decidedly drab (and it must be expected in a series of this magnitude that attempted to be "all things to all people" that there will be a certain percentage that are less interesting).

Listen to *South of the Border* and *Souvenir D' Italie* (Camden CAS 682 and 696 respectively), both the work of RCA's Mexican arranger/conductor Chucho Zarzosa, and hear a fresh and highly creative approach, at once delicate, playful, and rhetorical, to what have become overly familiar international

melodies. And he applies the same light, intelligent creativity to a wide variety of cinema tunes on *The Living Strings Play Hit Motion Picture Themes* (Camden CAS 673). William Hill Bowen's work for the Strings at times comes off as cold and rather forbidding, but he turns in an excellent hale and hearty *The Living Strings Play All the Music From Camelot* (Camden CAS 657) and one of the greatest "cascading strings" collections ever, both evocative and romantic, in *Shimmering Sounds of the Living Strings* (CAS 761). In the mid 60s Hill Bowen was replaced by famed English bandleader Geraldo (Gerald Bright) working with arranger Bernard Ebbinghouse who were responsible for the very respectable *Music From Fiddler On the Roof* (CAS 2234) and *The Living Strings Visit Alice's Restaurant* (CAS 2395), a delightful youth music outing.

But the shining star of the series is Britain's Johnny Douglas, whose initial *The Living Strings Play Music of the Sea* (CAS 639) from 1959 and later *Finian's Rainbow* (CAS 2268) of 1968 have already become genre classics. The former is a haunting juxtaposition of the grand (the introduction to *Ebb Tide* is exalted enough by itself to inspire courage and confidence) and the playful, while the latter realizes the full musical potential and stylistic diversity inherent in Burton Lane's famous score. Just as good, if less celebrated, are *The Living Strings Play Music From the Broadway Hit Carnival* (CAS 678), a congenial romp through the show that manages to render a set of largely pedestrian tunes quite memorable, *Mame and Other Songs From Broadway and Motion Pictures* (CAS 2106), a sparkling suite of pieces for trumpet with orchestra, *Music From Gone With the Wind* (CAS 2161), lyrical explorations of themes from the silver screen, *Airport Love Theme and Other Motion Picture Themes* (CAS 2420) (Dig those brass on *Theme From Mash!*), and *Music From Charlie Chaplin Movies* (CAS 2581, reissued under Chaplin's name as part of Gabriel's *An Immortal Performer* series on RCA CPL 1-2778 in 1978), the definitive collection of the great actor/director's melodies. Almost as good are *The Living Strings Play Henry Mancini* (CAS 760) and *Holiday For Strings* (CAS 760), the latter a bracing selection of David Rose and Leroy Anderson interpretations. Much simpler and hardly classics but especially appealing to me are *Twilight Time* (CAS 930) with guest organist Bob Ralston, and *Ebb Tide* (CAS 2291), a modest follow-up to *Music of the Sea* also featuring organ and sounds of the surf.

After an hiatus of three years in the mid 70s Johnny Douglas and the Living Strings returned on the parent label with a new style that emphasized a sleek and streamlined string ensemble with solo winds and rhythm covering current pop tunes, apparently designed with beautiful music-easy listening radio play in mind and reflecting his English work of that period with the BBC Midland Orchestra. The sound was thinner and, though well-blended, less mellow and more strident, and the ideas fewer and less highly realized. Still it provided the raw material for the 1978 masterpiece *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (RCA ANL 1- 2814) which contains some of Douglas' best writing and is vastly superior to its award-winning and better-selling predecessor *Feelings*.

Possessed of a fine instinct for rich wind sonorities (and those produced by his London orchestra in the 60s are some of the finest on record) and massed strings with medium and low register violins Douglas, whose technique and craftsmanship grace over half the Living Strings releases, is second only to Percy Faith in his ability to create memorable and appropriately supportive counterlines that appeal at once to the heart and the intellect. He is one of our finest orchestral writers and should be justly proud of his work on this series.

Fortunately, records by the Living Strings are still widely available, if not from RCA or your local emporium then from remainder houses and from the used LP stores that have sprung up, often profusely, in most towns and cities in the last several years. Check your local outlets and you are bound to come away with a number of them at very reasonable prices.

In summation we consider the music of the Living Strings delightful for its good nature and boundless joy, gracious in its impeccable taste, and highly civilized because, far more we think than space shots, wonder drugs, and modern conveniences, it represents the best our civilization has to offer.