

SCISSORS AND TAPE

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New Developments Help Potentialities of Disks

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WITH a razor blade and plenty of scotch tape any ordinary mortal standing knee-high in a pile of magnetic ribbons can perform minor miracles in tonal reproduction. He can overcome time and space, increase the lung capacity of an oboist or a singer, discover new dimensions, make the difficult less difficult, and perfection more perfect.

In a dream sequence from the film "An American in Paris," Oscar Levant (in the role of a struggling composer) realizes a lifelong ambition. He finds himself conducting a symphony orchestra in a performance of his own concerto. In Hollywood fashion, a spotlight fingers through the orchestra revealing an astonishing sight: Levant is playing the harp, piccolo, bassoon . . . in fact, the whole orchestra is manned by Levants, all smiling affably at conductor Levant. Were one man capable of playing every instrument in a symphony orchestra, such a dream would not be beyond the realm of possibility—with enough patience and tape.

One-Man Duets

The era of magnetic tape has already spawned one-man duets, bands and singing groups of which the outstanding example is the team of Les Paul and Mary Ford. The technique is simple. Any number of recordings can be superimposed on the same magnetized strip. Thus, after one "take," the performer dons a pair of earphones, which enable him to listen in on the first "track" while adding another. This procedure may be repeated until the desired effect is obtained. Superimposition also transcends the limitations of space. Two musical components of a concerto (soloist and accompaniment), can and have been recorded thousands of miles apart.

In addition to its extradimensional qualities, tape has revolutionized the nature of the recording session. During pre-LP days, edit-

ing was impossible once a performance was engraved on the 78 r. p. m. disk. Any imperfection such as a wrong note, trumpet fluff or cough, necessitated starting all over again—a waste of time, money and records. Under Sir Thomas Beecham's direction, Georges Noré sang eight successive "Salut Demeures" for a 78 r. p. m. recording of "Faust." The tenor almost collapsed after the eighth take. Beecham approved the first.

An atmosphere of informality and lessening of tension has accompanied the use of tape in recording sessions. The "clinker," a sword of Damocles suspended over the heads of recording directors in the 78 r. p. m. era, has lost its terrifying aspect. Now when a performer errs tape comes to his rescue. The offending section is easily removed and the corrected note or phrase is grafted on in its place. Splicing permits a pianist, for instance, to rectify a single wrong note in a rapid scale passage of sixteenth notes.

With the help of tape, a performer can record a musical work which he would not dare to play in public for fear of not being able to negotiate its technical hurdles. A few months ago a recording was released of Rossini's Wind Quartets. In the sixth quartet there is a cadenza-like passage for French horn. The rapid tempo, frequent wide intervals, and infrequent rests make this a French horn player's nightmare. At the tape recording session, however, where nothing is impossible, an illusion of ease and perfection was created.

Also in this category is the oboe obbligato to Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." Even the best soloist omits notes in sections where the chorus is at its height in order to catch his breath. On tape he can have his Bach and breathe too.

The recording director, a passive element before the development of tape, has now assumed a very vital and active role due to the extraordinary flexibility of the materials at his disposal. Like a painter, his musical canvas is subject to constant revision. But much

depends upon a discerning ear and impeccable taste. Careless tape editing has resulted in the premature clipping of overtones, a rehearsal take included side by side with the approved performance, abrupt acoustical changes, pitch variations, and so on.

Many music lovers and some recording companies throw up their hands in horror at the mention of tape editing. With so much splicing and patching, starting and stopping, how can an interpretation be as spontaneous as a continuous performance? After all, if the artist is really competent, he has no need for the "retoucher's" services. They also question the propriety of making a well-nigh unplayable passage sound easeful and natural. Surely this is perfection without a soul. Let us hear the artist the way he really sounds, they say.

On the other side of the ledger are those who uphold any amount of tape sorcery provided the intentions of the composer are scrupulously observed. So long as the make-up doesn't come across the footlights, the means justify the end. As for perfection, a recording is a permanent musical document to be heard over and over again, and into which the performer puts his finest efforts. Why then perpetuate an inadvertent harmonic on the violin, a trombone's blooper, or a high C that never quite made it?

The pros and cons of tape editing have merely been touched upon here. Discussions will undoubtedly continue for a long time to come of the question, "What hath Tape wrought?"