

## The Vinyl Renaissance – Speakers Corner LPs: L'histoire du soldat [Markevitch] & Beethoven Cello Sonatas [Rostropovich & Richter]

Written by Rob Pennock

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### Stravinsky

L'histoire du soldat

Narrator – Jean Cocteau  
 Soldier – Jean-Marie Fertey  
 Devil – Peter Ustinov  
 Princess – Anne Tonietti

Ulysse Delécluse (clarinet), Henri Helaerte (bassoon), Manoug Parikian (violin), Joachim Gut (double-bass), Maurice André (trumpet), Roland Schnorkh (trombone), Charles Peschier (percussion)  
 Igor Markevitch

Recorded October 1962 in Théâtre Vevey, Switzerland by Tony Negri

Speakers Corner LP: Philips 835181 AY

### Beethoven

Complete Sonatas for Piano and Cello [in F, Op.5/1; in G minor, Op.5/2; in A, Op.69; in C, Op.102/1; in D, Op.102/2]

Mstislav Rostropovich (cello) & Sviatoslav Richter (piano)

Recorded July 1961 & June 1962 at Walthamstow Town Hall, London, and the Rosenhügel Studios, Vienna

Harold Lawrence – Producer  
 C. R. Fine – Recording Engineer

Speakers Corner LP: PHS 2-920 (2 LPs)

Remastered at the Emil-Berliner-Studios, Hanover  
 Maarten de Boer – Remastering Engineer

Up until 1982 black-disc technology was in the ascendancy. First there were 78rpm shellac discs and then vinyl took over in the early 1950s. The first test Compact Disc (designed to fit Sony executive Norio Ohga's wife's favourite recording of Beethoven's 'Choral' Symphony by the Berlin Philharmonic, conducted by Karajan, at 66 minutes, but extended to ensure even the longest recording could fit, which then was a mono recording made during the 1951 Bayreuth Festival under Furtwängler, 74 minutes) – Richard Strauss's Eine Alpensinfonie (Karajan) – was demonstrated by Sony in 1981, then the first CD to be put on sale (in 1982) was The Visitors by ABBA. The first CD-album to be released was of Billy Joel's 52nd Street, and, a few months later, CD players became widely available and the first classical releases hit the shops. Today the future lies with downloads via high resolution Flac files that feed direct from a computer to a DAC. Yet for many audiophiles, vinyl remains king, and this has caused problems for LP collectors.

With the swift demise of the LP in the classical world, people dumped or sold their vinyl by the skip-load and some discs started to become collectable. This trend has continued apace and now some vinyl collectors will only have first-label LPs where both the disc and sleeve must be in near-perfect condition. As a result of this prices have shot through the roof.

There are however people who do not subscribe to the first-label school of buying, but trust their ears to decide which gives the best sound and purchase what are termed, second, third or later labels, including solid-state re-mastering of tube originals. However there was and is a big problem for vinyl collectors and that is finding LPs that – irrespective of the label or price – are in good condition and are readily available. They can be bought online, or if you live in a big city, from second-hand-LP shops, and in the UK collectors also visit charity (thrift in the US) shops. Websites tend to carry over-priced rarities and/or similarly over-priced later labels. So a few enterprising entrepreneurs decided that there was a gap to be filled and started producing high-quality remastering of 1950s and 1960s stereo recordings.

These discs were unusual in that they used 180g or 200g of vinyl of great purity. Immense claims were made for them about superior tracking ability, less background noise, and improved frequency response and clarity of sound. Being a great lover of analogue LP sound I heard copies of discs from – amongst others – Classic Sounds, Speakers Corner and

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Testament, and the results were decidedly mixed. Clearly they were not copies and no-one should have expected they would be (although many did) simply because unless you had exactly the same tape-deck, amplification, filters, cutting heads and vinyl, a copy would be impossible.

Certainly the hi-fi press and many vinyl lovers were not overly impressed. (A lot of them featured an image that had been moved forward, or a concerto soloist made even more prominent, and every remastering team seemed to have succumbed to the totally unnecessary desire to completely eliminate tape-hiss and background noise.) In some cases it seemed that the engineers were trying to create CD sound on vinyl. However, others – including a superb three-LP Speakers Corner set of Antal Doráti conducting music of the Second Viennese School on Mercury and a Testament box of André Cluytens conducting Ravel on Columbia (copies of the original have recently fetched in excess of £1,000) – had retained the originals' flow, balance, presence and naturalness, which no CD could hope to emulate. So, almost a decade on from the first 180g-remastering, where does this sector of the market stand in audio terms?

Taking the first of these Speakers Corner LPs, Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* with Igor Markevitch, you will find it almost impossible to find an early 'sixties pressing. Kai Seemann of Speakers Corner tells me that the tape used was very expensive to licence. Some years ago when I interviewed Mike Hobson of the American Classic Records label, he said exactly the same thing about the prices RCA wanted for its masters, and one can – with varying degrees of cynicism – speculate as to why this might be. Speakers Corner LPs retail at around £24.00 each in the UK, and are not produced in huge quantities, so these are not low-cost, high-volume items. It is also unfortunate that you have to email Speakers Corner to find out who distributes and sells the discs, rather than just going to their website. Since you will probably have to pay postage and packing, this will make them even more expensive.



It seems sensible to consider the pressings in terms of absolute and comparative sound. *The Soldier's Tale* has weight, depth, presence, definition, and, of course, analogue flow; whilst the balance is middle-distance in terms of the instruments and more forward in terms of the voices; what is missing is treble bloom. This becomes apparent when the disc is compared with a German Philips red label 120g pressing (AA 837 040.1 Y) of the with-German dialogue issue. Here the sibilants are far more vivid in the speech, as are the horse's-hooves effects, and the instruments – particularly the clarinet, trumpet and violin – are more alive. The difference is not enormous, but it is there and one can only assume that too much filtering was used, and/or the Tresors Classiques tapes were compromised.



If the Stravinsky is less-than-ideal, the Beethoven Cello Sonatas are well-nigh perfect. In 1961 Philips bought the Mercury label and used its established team of Harold Lawrence and C. R. Fine to record these works in London and Vienna. Speakers Corner has used an American PHS master-tape and the remastering has retained the treble bloom. Overall balance is fairly forward, and there is a clear and realistic gap between the instruments (the cello sits in the piano's curve and does not move at different dynamic levels). Both instruments are very clearly defined and have presence: it is rare to hear Rostropovich's exceptionally individual tone so vividly captured. The dynamic range is extended and the sound has great impact throughout its range, and, when compared with the first Dutch Hi-Fi Stereo label (835 182-3AY), it is superior in terms of definition, attack and sheer excitement – and those discs can now fetch £300 on a well-known auction website! These SC LPs sound infinitely superior to any CD remastering.

Turning to the performances, Markevitch's account of Stravinsky's masterpiece remains highly compelling. He eschews excessive tempo variations, points the rhythms and imparts a generally sophisticated and urbane tone to proceedings. Some will prefer the dialogue in English (and there does not seem to be any

translation included, which is highly regrettable, given the cost of the disc) but French is ideally suited to the music (it was first premiered in Lausanne in 1918 in a French translation) and the actors are pretty good, although Cocteau does occasionally sound rather amorphous, and I imagine Peter Ustinov's vowel sounds will outrage some Francophiles.

There are no reservations about the Beethoven – since the day of its release, this album has been a classic. Two musical giants, Rostropovich and Richter, combine perfectly to give big, immensely characterful performances of these masterworks. One only has to listen to the opening of the D major Sonata to realise that there are immense depths of feeling and reserves of power behind every note, and the cycle as a whole is exactly the same. Combine this with the tremendous sound, and one has vinyl heaven.



- Speakers Corner Records