

Stravinsky
firebird
 Suite
 (new augmented version)

Set mm = 653

the igor stravinsky *conducting*
 philharmonic-symphony
 orchestra
 of new york

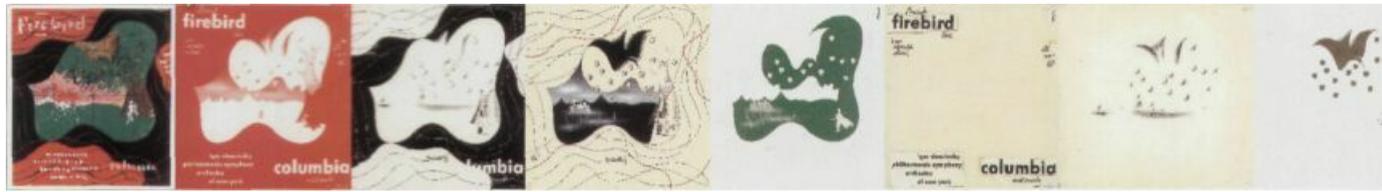
columbia
 masterworks

copyright 1947 columbia recording corp.

Alex Steinweiss (right) routinely followed a laborious process in creating his album covers—he did all the art, lettering, and color separations by hand, without the benefit of an assistant. In 1947, for Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*, released by Columbia Masterworks, he went through a number of sketches (facing page, top) before completing his final version (above). Based on a Russian folktale, *Firebird* is a ballet about a prince who wanders

into a mysterious forest and encounters an ogre who becomes the prince's nemesis. The mystical firebird, who is captured and then released by the prince, returns the favor by giving him a feather that will insure his protection. "The most important part in doing album cover art," says Steinweiss, "is that the music have a story. *Firebird* is a story with many images—the bird, the prince, and also apples play a role—to hold onto."





an eye for Music

Alex Steinweiss's elegant album covers from the '40s and '50s were designed without benefit of type shop or photostat house. He was a master improviser.

By Steven Heller

For over 20 years beginning in 1940, Alex Steinweiss composed symphonies of letter, color, and image for album covers. He did so initially as chief designer for Columbia Records, and later for Decca and other labels. Steinweiss was the first designer to produce original art for 78s, and he also invented (and was the first to design for) the LP sleeve shortly after CBS Laboratories introduced the long-playing record in 1948.

Born in Brooklyn in 1917, Steinweiss was a commercial art student at Abraham Lincoln High School in the '30s when he was introduced to the modernist poster designs of Lucian Bernhard, A.M. Cassandre, and Jean Carlu. The colorful graphics and expressive typography of these European giants influenced the mini-posters he would create for record albums. Steinweiss appreciated music of every kind and he routinely "translated" melodies he heard into moody, compelling designs. "I would have paid Columbia for the job I had," he says.

His distinctive album covers helped turn this medium into an art form, and his influ-

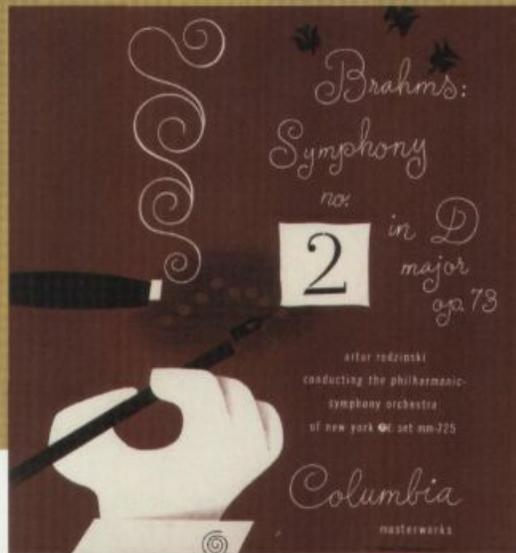
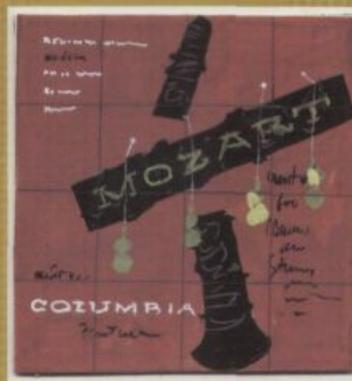
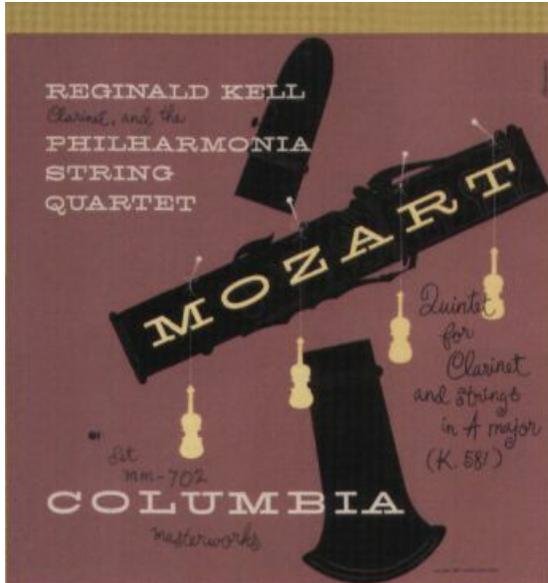
ence lingered long after he retired in the mid-1960s. Working out of a small office at the Columbia Records pressing factory in the gray industrial city of Bridgeport, Connecticut, Steinweiss was a one-man band responsible for creating the company's advertising and point-of-purchase displays. He gradually improved the look of the label's classical, jazz, and popular music repertoire because he believed that eye-catching packages would appeal to record buyers. He was right: Sales of Columbia products increased by as much as 800 percent under his aegis.

Conceiving ideas was the easy part; realizing them was harder. Bridgeport had no type shops or photostat houses, so Steinweiss was forced to improvise. One such improvisation was a hand-drawn, curlicue script that he named the Steinweiss Scrawl (and eventually sold through Photo-Lettering, Inc.); it became an economical replacement for machine-set type—as well as a trademark of his music packaging. "Scrawl was something that just came out of me. To my eye, it looked playful and attractive and was a good foil for

the typography," Steinweiss recalls. To reduce expenses, he made all his color images from overlays on a series of outline renderings, which began as 2"-by-2" thumbnail sketches. The finishes were accurate to the doodles. Though tedious, the process resulted in bold, poster-like designs, some of them becoming veritable logos for the music and musicians they represented.

Steinweiss retired from album design in the '60s—when photographs were becoming the preferred graphic for record albums, and psychedelic art replaced his modernist poster motifs. Subsequently, he did some packaging and other kinds of design. Now, at 87, and recipient of the 2004 AIGA Medal for Lifetime Achievement, he still designs the occasional classical cover for small orchestras, as well as posters for musical events in Sarasota, Florida, where he lives.

Presented here are case studies of a hand-picked few of Steinweiss's favorite albums from a collection of over 800 sketches and published covers. He is seeking a repository for this archive of pioneering work.



mozart

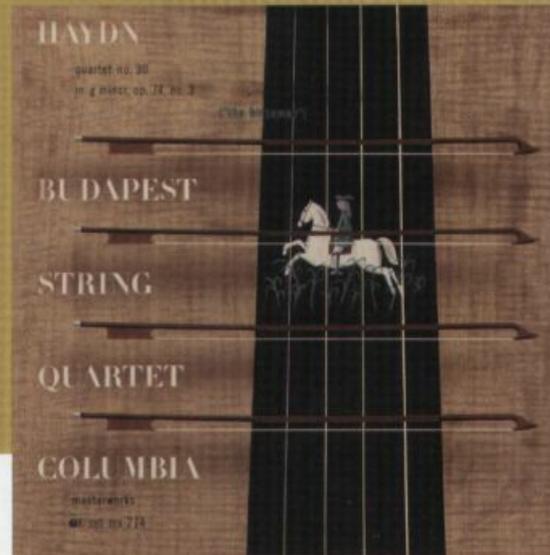
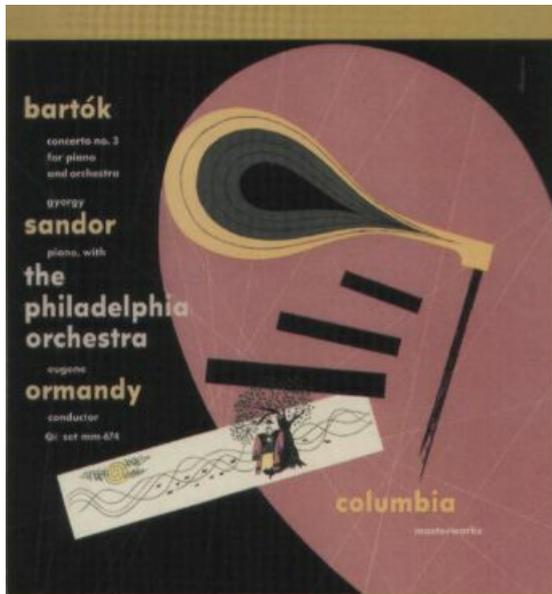
Quintet for Clarinet and Strings in A Major
Columbia Masterworks

1947 Steinweiss drew his inspiration from the way the three pieces of a clarinet are placed in a clarinet case. The four hanging violins indicate the string chamber music featured on the record. "This idea was pure design," Steinweiss says. "When you are doing a piece of pure music, there is no story, nothing to really hang onto. I dig down deeply to find an attractive design." The rationale for the type is easy visibility, he notes. "In those days, we had browser boxes, so as the customers were flipping through, if a Mozart hit them they'd pick it up." The words set in his Scrawl were less important than the names of the music and the artist, and therefore, "moved to the background" of the design.

brahms

Symphony No 2. in D Major, Op. 73
Columbia Masterworks

1948 This album is one in a series of Brahms covers where each is different, though each has a modern look. "Brahms was my all-time favorite composer," Steinweiss says. "But why I used brown and black, I don't know." The hand and cigar was very Brahms: He was a big cigar smoker, as was Steinweiss. "Frankly, I don't think Brahms could have put a note to paper, and I don't think I could have made an image, without a cigar," Steinweiss says. Of all the albums he designed, this one reflects what he calls a true act of love for the music, and the use of Scrawl as the main lettering made it even more personal. "By the way, the curl of the smoke echoes the design of the type," he notes.



bartók

**Concerto No. 3 for Piano and Orchestra
Columbia Masterworks**

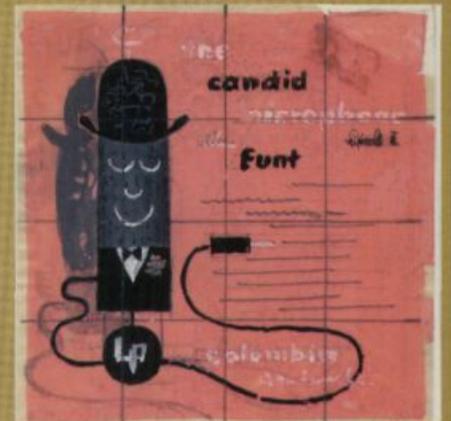
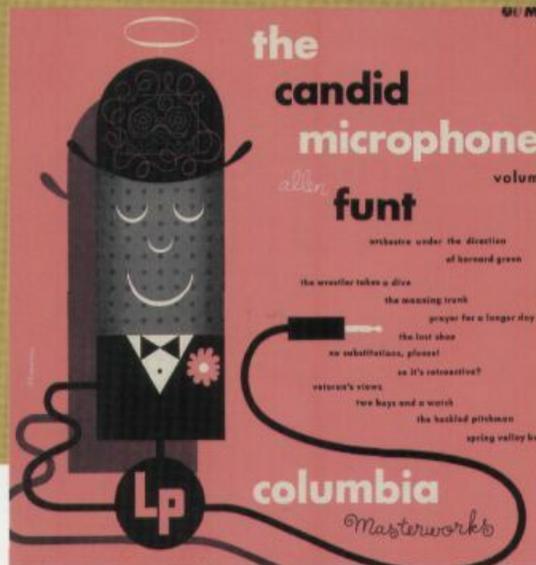
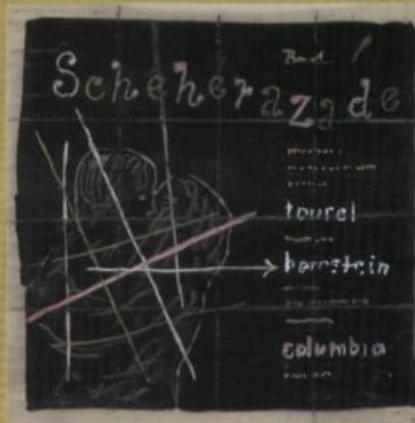
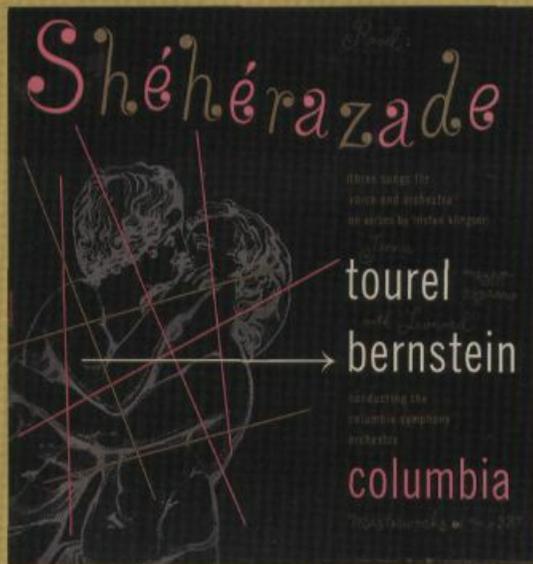
1949 Bela Bartók traveled throughout his native Hungary and neighboring countries compiling collections of folk songs. Yet his musical approach was decidedly advanced—he was a thoroughly contemporary composer. "For the illustration, I wanted to blend the folk and the modern," Steinweiss recalls. "I had to depend on the instrument itself and took the piano apart, using the keys, strings, and different parts of the piano in the composition. On the white key, I included a little peasant figure that was typical of Hungary."

haydn

**"The Horseman" Quartet No. 30 in G Minor,
Op. 74, No. 3, Columbia Masterworks**

1949 The cover image says it: four strings and four bows. As Steinweiss explains, "It designed itself." For the background wood grain, he used papers of different textures he had collected, and he scoured the specialty paper firms for additional samples. "So this part was a collage," he says. "But the bows were drawn, as was the horseman. Of course, everything was accurate. I wouldn't have it any other way."

The graphics sometimes became veritable logos for the music and musicians they represented.



ravel

Scheherazade
Columbia Masterworks

1950 This was a racy theme for 1950. Of the three songs in this suite, Steinweiss notes that "the last and most important one deals with homosexuality." Ravel was gay, and this design was based more on that fact than on the famous Scheherazade of legend. Steinweiss saw this cover as an opportunity to "go in a totally modern direction." The lines stretching through the kissing figures "are without significance," he says, but since the first two songs on the album have an element of conflict, the lines convey this tension. He selected purple "for its sensual quality," though he says he does not know why he put in a black background: "Sometimes a design just happens." The artwork was copied from a 19th-century German encyclopedia's illustrated steel engravings.

allen funt

The Candid Microphone Volume 1
Columbia Masterworks

1950 Before hosting the popular '60s TV show *Candid Camera*, its creator, Allen Funt, hosted *The Candid Microphone*, which played good-natured jokes on unsuspecting victims. As the centerpiece for this gag album, Steinweiss appropriated the radio microphone that was a CBS hallmark. "It was made to order for me," he says. "There was no problem thinking about what to do: I just picked two colors—shocking pink and black—and it worked. I didn't need to use anything more, because the symbol was so strong I knew people would smile and understand, which was indicative of the show itself." For this early LP from Columbia Masterworks, he also designed the LP logo, and for the album type he combined Futura lowercase with two words in his Scrawl.



Stravinsky

Firebird Suite
Decca Records

1954 This version of Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* was done during a later period in Steinweiss's career, and in contrast to his earlier poster style, he used a streamlined, abstract approach to achieve a more Russian feeling in telling the story. "The design uses red, green, and the opposing colors gold and black, which were the royal Russian colors," Steinweiss relates. "The elements come out of the music itself." The bird in the composition is in the form of a feathered arrow aimed at the apple. This becomes the life-saving talisman bestowed upon the prince by the firebird after she is set free.

britten/martin

Piano Concerto No. 1, Five Preludes
Decca Records

1968 One of Steinweiss's last album covers, this purely abstract composition veered markedly from his earlier work. "The art had no meaning at all," he explains. "It was just a device to attract attention." The recording artist, Marjorie Mitchell, was not too well known, and the album was a repertoire piece that had no story. So, he adds, "the final result had to be attractive, for the only purpose of using album art is to get the person looking through the box to pick it up."

He believed that eye-catching packages would appeal to record buyers. He was right.