Barring a smattering of abandoned attempts by various record labels, Alex Steinweiss at Columbia Records was the first to illustrate record jackets. His 1939 design for a revue of Rodgers and Hart show tunes officially ushered in the era of album art. Many of the nearly 1,000 covers he did over his career were exemplars of 1940s and '50s design.

"For the Record:
The Life and Work
of Alex Steinweiss
[Entire Story]

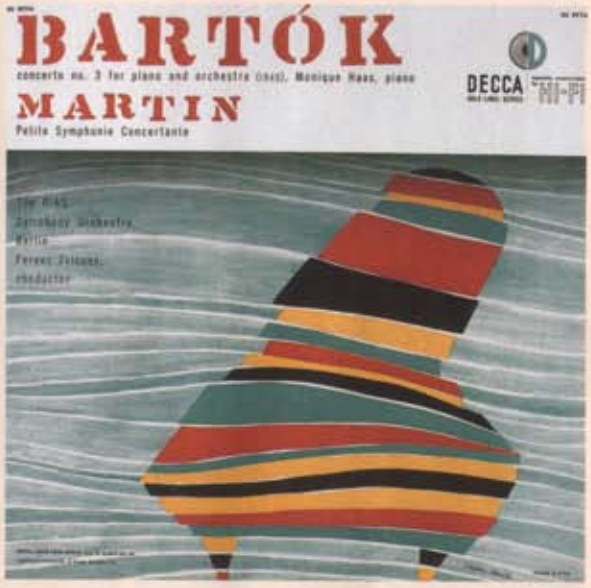
Princeton
Architectural
Press

Jacket Required

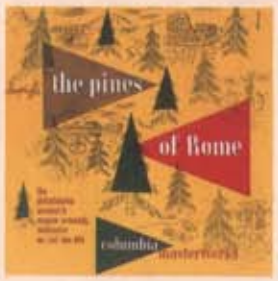
Though the Beatles are often cited as the progenitors of the album as an artistic conceit, the term's musical origin referred to the packaging of shellac 78s. Housed in paper sleeves inside an unadorned pasteboard-bound folio, a symphony could easily span four discs of the five-minutes-per-side 78s; typically only the composer's name and the title of the composition would appear on the cover. Record stores themselves didn't properly exist, as albums were sold in the "white goods" department of shops alongside refrigerators, radios, and phonographs.

Fortunately for music fans and record execs alike, graphic designer Alex Steinweiss had an abiding love of both Gershwin, and avant-garde European posters from the 1920s and '30s, and the idea of translating his favorite music into graphic terms. After an education at what later became the Parsons School of Design in New York and a stint working under Viennese poster pioneer Joseph Binder, the 21-year-old Steinweiss signed on as artistic director at Columbia Records in 1939.

At first, Steinweiss was in charge of advertising and promotional material at Columbia, and of his early days there he says: "After several months I got disgusted with what I was doing. I realized that they weren't selling music, they were selling crappy albums." He then pressed his bosses, who initially balked at the increased cost, to allow him to design decorative, graphic covers for record albums, the first of their kind. "I offered the opportunity to do something never before done," he recounts, "to make creative album covers using principles of advanced design. They let me do five or six covers as a test, and ▸



To Steinweiss's shock he and a colleague were fired from their jobs aiding Viennese poster artist Joseph Binder. Dejected, he packed up his art supplies and headed home that Friday. The next day Binder's wife called to tell him that Binder didn't have the heart to fire just one of his employees so he let them both go so as not to hurt the other man's feelings. Binder wanted Steinweiss back bright and early Monday and was sorry for the trouble.



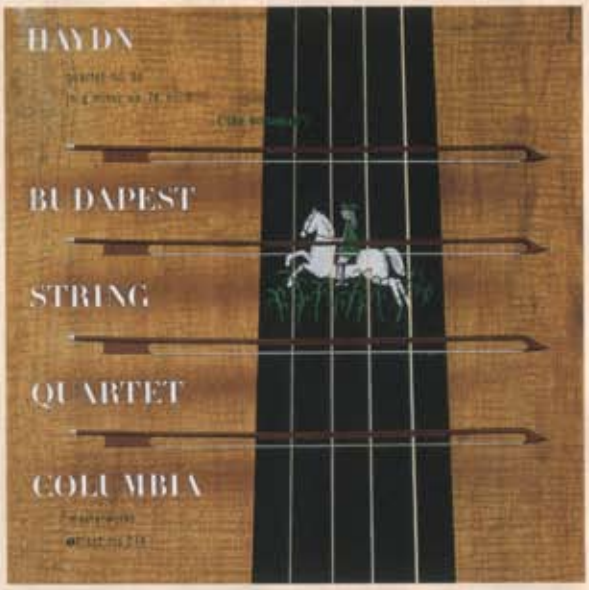
when the first one [a collection of Rodgers and Hart show tunes] hit the market in 1939, its sales went up 850 percent. They put it in *Time* magazine."

A serious music fan from his boyhood, Steinweiss was especially good with classical music. His bold, flat colors and stylized geometry owed a debt to the Bauhaus, while the figures on his covers sprang from American and European folklore. His cover for Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* alludes to the majestic piano roll midway through, while the lone streetlight and looming cityscape suggest the bawdy, crying clarinet that opens the piece and establishes its main theme.

His cover for Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* is less evocative than the Gershwin, but is marked by a distinctly exotic, primal feel. While Stravinsky's ballet owed more to Eastern European folk melodies than to those of Africa, the primitivist rhythms, embrace of harmonic dissonance, and the esoteric mysteries central to its story are all suggested by the canted type and African figure. The cover for Bartók's third piano concerto—reputedly a gift from the composer to his wife—suggests the composer's lighter moments, those less enthralled with the churning atonality of his string quartets than with the concerto's third movement, evoked through the cover's colorful, windswept piano.

In the case of operas and ballets, Steinweiss often opted for a more representational style, trying to bring out the stories in the music using vibrant colors, stock characters, and national symbols. Buffalo and Native Americans adorn the cover of Dvořák's *New World* ►

With the massive jump in sales graphic record jackets afforded, it wasn't long before recording artists made their love for Steinweiss (and their bump in pay) known. Renowned conductor Leopold Stokowski didn't want anyone but Steinweiss designing his covers; bandleader and pianist Eddy Duchin as well as Metropolitan Opera mezzo-soprano Rise Stevens were also big fans.



Symphony, while an album of Haydn's chamber music shows a cartoonish horseman riding across the neck of a violin. Steinweiss pays homage to art history in some cases: cubism in his cover for Prokofiev's *Fifth Symphony*, El Lissitzky's classic poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* for Prokofiev's *Concerto #3 in C Major for Piano and Orchestra*, and Aaron Douglas's flat, Harlem Renaissance style for Paul Robeson's *Songs of Free Men*.

After leaving Columbia Records, Steinweiss moved on to a successful freelance career, where he designed record jackets for a number of companies. At one point he even used his wife as his agent. "She didn't get me one damn job, but she was beautiful and she had guts," he recounts.

"Just plain design didn't mean a damn thing," Steinweiss says. "You had to know the music. I had to find a way to bring out the beauty of the music and the story. Other record companies started doing covers right away, but they didn't know classical music. We were miles ahead of them."

Miles ahead in design to be sure, but Steinweiss's formal innovation wasn't limited to the superficial. In 1948 the 33-rpm LP began to replace the 78. Because a whole symphony could fit on just one disc, the bound album packaging (which Steinweiss had likened to a tombstone) was no longer needed. He set to work, and after some trial and error came up with the cardboard LP sleeve that's still in use today.

"That stupid little jacket lasted 50 years, up until the CD," he muses. "That's when I gave up. You can't design anything for a little CD booklet. You can hardly see it." ▸

10 Things You Should Know About Alex Steinweiss

1 / Steinweiss's love of graphic design began in high school in Brooklyn with his teacher Leon Friend. His classmates—known as the Art Squad—included future advertising and design greats William Taubin, Seymour Chwast, and Gene Federico.

2 / Expecting to fight during World War II, Steinweiss was stationed in New York City in the Navy's Training Aids Development Center. There he designed infographics, posters, and instructional books for sailors.

3 / Given the sometimes-short production schedules and limited choice of typography, Steinweiss often opted for his own looping handwriting. Dubbed "Steinweiss Scrawl," in the 1950s it became a legitimate typeface when Photolettering Inc. bought it.

4 / When Steinweiss developed the cardboard LP sleeve, he patented it under his own name. Columbia Records forced him to turn over the patent to them.

5 / With the advent of cover design, records began to be sold with their faces out instead of their spines. Steinweiss moved the critical information to the top third of the jacket to facilitate easy flipping by shoppers.

6 / Though Steinweiss's most fruitful and innovative years were with Columbia Records, he also designed numerous covers for Decca, London, and Everest Records—a company he helped launch.

7 / Not just a record-cover man, Steinweiss designed magazine covers, print ads, and labels for whiskey, wine, and candy companies. "They only remember the records," he says. "It's very annoying."

8 / In 1981 Steinweiss exhibited 30 paintings he'd made from listening to classical recordings, entitled "Homage to Music," at Lincoln Center in New York.

9 / Averse to digging through dusty crates of discarded vinyl for a bona fide Steinweiss jacket? Sony Classical has reissued select Steinweiss covers on CD in its Masterworks Heritage series.

10 / Now 90 years old, Steinweiss still paints and occasionally designs posters for community events in Sarasota, Florida, where he lives with his wife. ■

"Just plain design didn't mean a damn thing. You had to know the music."

Alex Steinweiss in his studio (far left). Clockwise from top left: The trumpet, an element of the logo for the Sarasota Jazz Club; a dour, abstract cover for *Idea* magazine from 1970; a bedizened record jacket from 1954; the Camouflage poster was designed for the U.S. Navy during World War II.