

Beecham: A Centenary Discography, by Michael H. Gray. Foreword by Anthony C. Griffith. London: Duckworth, 1979, £ 9.80; New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979, \$28.00.

With Leopold Stokowski, Sir Thomas Beecham was the most prolific recording conductor of his generation, and thus most in need of thorough discographing. Several laborers have preceded Michael Gray in this tangled vineyard. Ward Botsford's unsystematic and anecdotal effort was published in The American Record Guide (May 1967-April 1968, with addenda in December 1969) and also in the Beecham Society's journal, Le Grand Baton (VI/3-4, August and November 1969). Botsford eschewed refinements of data beyond basic American and British catalogue numbers, and guessed, with varying degrees of accuracy, at recording dates; he included non-commercial recordings but not unpublished studio ones. The arrangement was alphabetically by composer and title.

In 1975, the Beecham Society brought forth a much more ambitious work, based on Botsford's but now incorporating matrix and take numbers and precise recording dates. This was organized in categories (broadly, chronological and contractual divisions, sometimes further subdivided), and within each category by composer and title. Although a full composer-and-title index was provided (and also an index to catalogue numbers, useful for tracking down couplings), this hybrid arrangement sacrificed the very tangible advantages of Botsford's straight alphabetical sequence without achieving the compensating virtues of a completely chronological setup. Thus, aside from its numerous errors and omissions, this discography proved in practice extremely cumbersome to use.

Michael Gray's work, set in real type and bound between hard covers, marks a considerable step closer to the ideal--without, however, completely attaining it. For one thing, Gray sidesteps the (admittedly thorny) category of broadcast and similar material, although he does take note of more-or-less-non-commercial reissues (such as the Beecham Society's) of commercial recordings; for this category, we will still have to consult the earlier work. On the other hand, the unpublished studio recordings are quite fully documented--an expansion of listings that in practice yields primarily frustration, for most such material is presumably beyond recovery; still, the information about Beecham's (and the record companies') intentions is often interesting. Access to the EMI staff and archives has yielded a documentation much more detailed, precise, and authoritative than is found in the earlier works (surpassing, too, the extensive emendations Gray furnished the Beecham Society, included on several crowded supplementary pages to its publication).

Gray has elected a chronological sequence for the listings, and provides an index by composer and title to assist the repertory-oriented collector. (There is also an index to associated performers, but none to orchestras--it would have been useful to have, say, the terminal dates for Beecham's recordings with the LPO and RPO, and a specific index to the other orchestras with which he made the occasional

recording.) In fact, the chronological sequence is less than absolute: Beecham often recorded pieces in fits and starts, skipping around at different sessions, and Gray sensibly places such pieces under the date of the first session involved. With LP, the possibilities for such assemblages multiplied, and tales--alas, untold here--are implicit in some of these listings, such as the Handel-Beecham Love in Bath: dates stretching over nearly three years, with Gray's concluding observation that "It is not possible to determine which tapes from which sessions were edited to form the approved master tape"! Now and then, one has a reservation about the procedure adopted in a specific case: sessions for the Beethoven Mass in C were held in May and November 1956 and again in April 1958, but a note explains that the 1956 tapes were rejected and only 1958 material used in the published version. I would have listed this as two different recordings: an unpublished one from 1956 and a published one from 1958, but Gray puts it all under 1956 as a single item.

This is one form of a question that surfaces at several points in the Beecham discographies: What is the proper "unit of entry" in a discography? It also arises with items such as the 1947 disc (published only as RCA Victor 12-0583) of which the Sinfonia from Bach's Christmas Oratorio occupies one-and-a-half sides and the Gavotte from the Handel-Beecham Amaryllis Suite the remainder. Ought the unit of entry be the musical work, the side (that is, the matrix)--or, as both the Beecham Society and Gray have preferred in this case, the disc as a whole? On many occasions, the Society's discography goes so far as to treat 78 sets with their single-sided fillers as single units, while Gray tends to list fillers independently.

Of course, were one to establish the side/matrix as unit, then consistency would strictly require a rather precise description of the musical contents of each 78 side. This has been done (e.g., Moore's Elgar on Record), and the information can prove useful: even those of us who work primarily with LP dubbings may want to find out where were the side breaks that Anthony Griffith has so miraculously concealed. Still, I suppose that few discographers, especially when faced with a repertory as catholic as Beecham's, really want to get that involved with measure numbers and rehearsal letters, and most users are adequately served by such general descriptions as "Mvt. I, pt. 1" or the like. (Gray doesn't always give us what we need in this department: for the 1947/48 recording of the Mozart Divertimento, K. 131. he does tell us about Beecham's bowdlerization of the score, but neglects to show which movements are on which matrices. With most symphonic works, however, he appends a column of Roman numerals that evidently stand for movements--but it is a legitimate complaint, I think, to note that nowhere, in the Introduction or elsewhere, is the significance of these numbers actually explained.)

Making the work the basic unit of entry would, of course, require listing some matrices twice (in the case of half-sided works), and evidently discographers rebel at that prospect. Admittedly, so treating the occasion when Beecham recorded three Delius works (Summer Night on

the River, Summer Evening, and Song Before Sunrise) and disposed them over four 78 sides--each, thus, occupying a side and a fraction!--would call for both fortitude and ingenuity. In fact, the principal reason for urging the musical work as the most desirable unit of entry is that, ever since the advent of tape as a mastering medium, it has been the unit of publication and reissue: for example, the continued coupling of Rossini's Scala di seta Overture and Handel's Arrival of the Queen of Sheba was almost inevitable as long as the tail end of the Rossini and all of the Handel were inextricably wedded on a single metal part (Gray has incorrectly listed the two pieces as filling a side each); however, since LP, the two recordings have been always treated independently--and will surely continue to be in future reissues on LP, digidisk, or whatever is yet to come. When several works are lumped together as an entry, then the listings for separate reissues are likely to grow cumbersome: the Beecham Society's work furnishes many apposite examples.

As already intimated, Gray is a shade stingy with procedural explanations. His Introduction describes a "general pattern" for entries that in fact applies primarily to 78 RPM matters. However, it is not really followed in the very first section, devoted to acoustic recordings. And although the author's notes following the listing of the initial Gramophone Company sessions do eventually explain what is going on, the duplicate listings, transcribed from matrix book and matrix cards, are still confusing--I think we should have been given a single list incorporating the author's conclusions on the basis of those primary sources, rather than mere diplomatic transcripts thereof.

Although explanatory notes turn up now and then in the course of the listings (e.g., at the point when tape recording comes into use), I feel that Gray has not given sufficient assistance to the less experienced user. He provides a list of abbreviations used for record labels, but nary a clue as to the physical forms (diameter, speed, etc.) that the many catalogue prefixes and numbers denote. No doubt most readers of this Journal can swim with ease in the alphabet soup of DB, ALP, EHA, SEBQ, and the like, but I fear that novice collectors and enthusiasts will more than once find themselves gasping for breath. (If the Beecham Society's opus appears less confusing in this respect, that is principally because, less thorough in its ferreting out of alternative issues, it only rarely turns up the more esoteric prefixes.)

Disappointingly, the handsome typographical presentation of Gray's work reveals, on close inspection, a considerable number of small errors, suggesting that some imagined urgency of publishing during the centennial year prevented as much or as painstaking proofreading as work of this kind demands. Further complications evidently arose from the use of computer typesetting, which can be recalcitrant in the face of irregular tabular material. Fortunately, a large number of such errors are fairly self-evident (e.g., the extra digit in the matrix number of item 3, various transposed letters, and the garbled titles for sides in some of the opera recordings). Publishers should recognize that the value of discographic publications is in direct proportion to their accuracy; all

of us (I feel safe in saying) would rather have them later and correcter than quicker and sloppier.

Despite that, Gray's achievement is considerable; with the qualifications noted, he has given us something more complete, more detailed, more accurate, and more convenient to use than did his predecessors. If I now go on to propose further tasks for Beecham discography, it is not in a spirit of denigrating what has been done, but because I think we must all set our sights higher and broader. Context and background, as well as the bare facts of the records themselves, are necessary if we are to make the best use of the sounds we inherit from the past. Since musical biographers, with a few notable exceptions, have been reluctant to consider the making of recordings as a significant activity in the careers of their subjects, or to consider the recordings themselves as significant documentary evidence, I suggest that it is up to discographers to look beyond matrix numbers and dates, to correlate the preserved sounds with the facts of lives and careers.

This means, among other things, facing up to unanswered questions, leaving no unturned stones. One such, for example, is the matter of Beecham's recording contracts. One wonders, for example, why the Berlin Zauberflöte came out on HMV when virtually all his other work at the time (except for his contributions to HMV's Sibelius Society) was done for Columbia. In the Beecham Society's discography one finds a tantalizing letter from HMV to RCA concerning the 1945 LPO recordings (which were evidently made at RCA's expense), and one would like to know the rest of this story. My dream Beecham discography will include a full explanation of who owns what from those years--and why--and will also explain why Beecham continued to do sessions for HMV as late as October 1952 (long after his contract with CBS/Columbia in New York had come into effect), and why there are similar ragged edges between the CBS/Philips period and the final EMI contract. Perhaps it is too much to hope that the actual contracts might be made public (as was done, exceptionally, for Moore in his work on Elgar), but the circumstances behind the changes in these personally and professionally significant relationships are a legitimate concern of biography, and one that discographic scholars are peculiarly equipped to investigate.

In another direction, the Beecham super-discography will certainly include precise identification of the musical sources for all those Handel arrangements--a Herculean task, but perhaps now within the realm of possibility, for a Handel thematic catalogue is now being published. To date, no discographer has ventured further into this minefield than Clough and Cuming a quarter-century ago, and all have elsewhere been less than impeccable in the identification of musical contents and similar tidings of the discographical closet. For operas and similar works on 78s, we want not only matrix and take numbers, but the titles or text incipits of individual sides (which Gray sometimes gives, and the Society doesn't), correlation of singers with roles (Gray only rarely, the Society never), and indications of who sings on which sides (supplied by neither). Gray neglects to tell us that the acoustic recordings of

the Midsummer Night's Dream Scherzo, Barber of Seville Overture, and Bartered Bride Overture are all abridged (Beecham Society notes all of them except the first); though the older collector, familiar with 78 RPM running times, may well figure that out, the novice may not. (Since the 1918 recordings of "Ballet dances: Fantastic, Burla, Valse" from Schumann's Manfred were never published, I will not take Gray to task for having failed to identify them further--certainly, nothing in the score remotely resembles those titles!)

Beyond that, it would be desirable to know just how the recordings relate to Beecham's concert activity: which ones were made cold in the studio, which followed upon live performances? The functioning of the Delius Trust is also a matter of legitimate interest, casting light on the various bursts of recording in that repertory. One has heard that Beecham was indignant about the release of the Hoffmann film soundtrack; surely a discography should include that information, and also try to establish whether the indignation arose on artistic grounds or merely financial ones. The in-house recordings at Covent Garden in the later '30s need much more explication--a story that has not yet been told adequately (least of all by their producer, the late Walter Legge, in his characteristically choleric and evasive article in the Covent Garden magazine About the House, Spring 1973, pp. 48ff.). And who the devil was "V. Shaistch," for whom Beecham and the LPO in 1934 privately recorded a number of sides from Gounod's Faust, with chorus but apparently without soloists--was this some rich man's custom-made "Music-Minus-One" set?

Beechamites, excelsior!

David Hamilton