

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor:

David Hamilton's review of Beecham: A Centenary Discography (Vol. XII, No. 3, pp. 265-9) raises an interesting and provocative issue. We discographers, he says, "must all set our sights higher and broader"; to make up for the omissions of musical biographers, we should include in discographies information that will "correlate the preserved sounds with the facts of lives and careers." Certainly such correlations should be made, but I can't agree that discographies are the place for them.

Discography is, I believe, basically similar to bibliography, which has been defined as the study and description of books as material objects. (See for example Philip Gaskell, A New Introduction to Bibliography, New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, especially pp. 1 and 321.) A bibliographer of Melville, then, would trace the publication history of his works, describe the appearance of the various editions, and identify textual variants among authoritative sources. But the sources of Melville's invention, the circumstances under which he wrote the works, his contracts with his publishers, and other such matters are not really grist for the bibliographer's mill except as they bear directly on the books as material objects. To put it more broadly, a bibliographer, or a discographer, quite properly works with the materials and according to the purposes relevant to his field. That, I think, is what Michael Gray has done in his Beecham discography, and done very well.

This is not to say that the questions of context and background Mr. Hamilton raises are not interesting and important. I would like to know their answers, and others too, such as Beecham's criteria for approving or rejecting recordings. I would have expected to find the answers in Alan Jefferson's recent Beecham biography, not least because Mr. Jefferson is himself a capable and thorough discographer. He does in fact offer some information about Beecham's recording work, but not enough. Harvey Sachs does much better by Toscanini in his recent biography of the maestro, a book which could serve as a model for other musical biographies--and for which, of course, Sachs could rely on much previous research into Toscanini's concerts and recordings. What we need, I am convinced, are not "super-discographies" but rather properly comprehensive biographies, taking into account the findings of sound discographic research.

Of course, discography makes neither the discographers nor their publishers rich, and in these days of tight money and blockbuster publishing it is especially difficult to persuade publishers to take on a scholarly work. I therefore wish that Mr. Hamilton had reviewed the Beecham discography in a more generously appreciative spirit. In $4\frac{1}{2}$ pages I could find only four sentences that spoke favorably of the work or any aspect of it; that is very faint praise. Of course, a reviewer must point out a book's faults, but surely he should also be an advocate for important work well done. Duckworth, and Holmes & Meyer, will find little in the review to reward them for their enterprise or encourage

them to do more. That I find unfortunate and, in view of the Beecham discography's many virtues, unjust.

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