

A MONUMENTAL HISTORY OF VICTOR RECORDINGS IS LAUNCHED

Ted Fagan and William R. Moran (compilers), The Encyclopedic Discography of Victor Recordings, Pre-Matrix Series (1900-1903). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983. Pp. lxix + 393. \$49.95

In 1963 two classical record-collectors sent a letter to George Marek, then president of RCA Victor, asking permission to study Victor's private recording files for information on some Red Seal 78's they owned. Remarkably, he agreed. Little did any of these gentlemen know that this small request would mark the beginning of one of the most massive discographical research projects ever undertaken--a comprehensive published listing of every U.S. Victor recording made during the first 50 years of the company's history.

Victor's contributions to the history of recording are incalculable. It was the largest recording company in America (and, through its affiliates, in the world) during the first half of the twentieth century, and a principal force in the classical, popular, and country fields, as well as in all other fields of recording. Its recording activities were enormous. Fagan and Moran have set out to list all of these recordings (excluding some foreign-language series) from 1900 to 1950. Most of these data have already been assembled, during 20 years of research, and can be expected to fill some 20 to 30 volumes. We now have before us the first of these volumes, covering the "pre-matrix series"--recordings made between January 1900 and April 1903.

The vast majority of the information in the EDVR comes directly from the old Victor files, which have fortunately been preserved at the company's headquarters in New York. Significant gaps exist, however. No files survive for the early twelve- and fourteen-inch issues, so information for these had to be gleaned from early promotional literature and from copies of the records in the hands of collectors. In addition, it was necessary to decipher somehow the codes and conventions of Victor's vast and complex early filing system, which no one presently at Victor understood. The mystery surrounding the files was apparently intentional. They had first been the private province of a Miss Briggs, who maintained them for Eldridge Johnson beginning in the early days and for many years thereafter. She eventually trained a young lady named Miss Garrison to be her successor, and Miss Garrison controlled them until the 1950's. Early in the present project author Fagan had a stroke of good luck when he discovered that Miss Garrison was living in a New Jersey nursing home. Realizing that this elderly lady was probably the only person who could unravel the secrets of Johnson's early recording program and of how to read the files, he carefully approached her. Unfortunately the old lady flatly refused to reveal anything about them. What she knew went with her to the grave.

Fagan then began the arduous task of piecing together small clues. A single disc with some odd markings, which corresponded to unexplained markings in the files, provided the key to the origin of the twelve-inch

series. Eventually the outline fell into place, and Fagan and Moran began looking for a publisher to make all this information public. That proved almost as difficult as cracking the files, but now--20 years after the project began--the first volume is finally at hand.

The earliest recordings listed here were not issued under the Victor label, but on the predecessor labels of Victor's founder, Eldridge R. Johnson. A few, in fact, were pressed experimentally as double-sided Berliner records in mid 1900 (these have been described in detail in an article by this reviewer, in Antique Phonograph Monthly, Vol. III, No.6, June-July 1975). Most of the early labels are pictured in a section at the front of the book. They illustrate Johnson's gradual evolution away from the Berliner company, and its "Berliner Gram-o-Phone" records, with which Johnson had been affiliated in the late 1890's: first "Improved Gram-o-Phone Record," then just "Improved Record," and finally "Victor Record." Numerous label styles are pictured.

The heart of the book is its listing of recorded titles in matrix order. Since the matrix number was used as the issue number in these early days, any Victor recording of the period can be readily located. All are, of course, one-sided. Each entry gives as a minimum the name of the artist, the title, composer, takes made (issued takes are underlined), recording date and issue number. A sample entry looks as follows, in part:

A-483 ALBASORA (Mme); CHALIA (Mme): TROVATORE: Ai nostri Monti (Verdi)

-1,2 - 30 Oct '00 - V-483

Perhaps most interesting is the added information that accompanies many entries. In the case of A-483, we also learn that there was piano accompaniment; that the disc should be played at 75.00 rpm (according to the authors); and that 722 copies were pressed, after which the master was returned to the factory in 1903.

The pressing figures come from the Victor files and are present for about half the listings. They may well be incomplete, even for those titles that have them (they seem to represent press runs during the years 1900-1902), but they give a fascinating idea of the general dimensions of individual disc sales during that time--information that, to my knowledge, has never before been published. Few exceed 2000-3000 copies, and many show less than 1000 copies made. The largest total that I turned up in a fast scan was for an obscure Silas Leachman number: the folks out there must have really liked "Truscalina Brown" (10,124 copies). My own candidate for record-you're-most-likely-to-trip-over from this period, "The Holy City" logged about 15,000 copies in 8 versions, including a street piano on A-201 (4 other versions, mercifully, were not released). Other big sellers included Sousa's "Warblers" and "Invincible Eagle March," the Haydn Quartet's "Vesper Service" and "The Church Scene from 'The Old Homestead'."

These were the exceptions. In comparison, poor Mme. Chalia could count on only 200-300 copies per recording. No wonder they're hard to find! Incidentally, Chalia is credited in the files (and hence in this book) as having made a whole series of Chinese records, some as duets with popular baritone S.H. Dudley. One wonders if the clerks in the front office were having a little fun with the files when Eldridge wasn't looking (at least one of these screeching, clanging records has turned up, and it certainly doesn't sound like the eminent soprano).

The book has several sections in addition to the main, 210-page matrix listing. More than 100 pages are devoted to a chronological listing of recording sessions, giving abbreviated information on what was recorded each day; the reader can then get further details in the main listings. There are complete artist and title indexes, a section of "notes," and another of "miscellanea." An unfortunate aspect of this organization is that the reader must sometimes jump around between these sections to locate all the information about a recording. Take for example A-2186, a Crossley recording. The matrix entry (p.167) gives us the basic information. However, we must go to the chronological sessions entry (p.333) to learn the name of the piano accompanist, the artist's first name (Ada), and the rather significant fact that this was the first Red Seal recording. Then we look in the notes (p.216) to find that it was first released on the Monarch label, and in the artist index (p.346) to see that Mme. Crossley was a contralto. Another example is the matrix entry for A-1397, whose artist is indicated as "Fernand." Not unless you happened to look in the artist index (hardly a logical place to check) would you find out that this was a pseudonym, and that it is actually DeGogorza.

A more desirable arrangement would have been to put all information together in one place--presumably under the matrix entry--and have session, artist, and title sections simply refer to that one place. Notes and miscellany should be with the basic listing too; sometimes they contain significant information (an asterisk in the matrix entry warns you to look in the notes section, but miscellany is not cross-referenced).

This organizational inconvenience, however, is hardly a serious flaw given the incredible wealth of information in the book. Besides the popular vocal and instrumental tunes of the day, there is early show music, vaudeville, "folk" music ("Turkey In the Straw," the Dinwiddie Colored Quartet recordings, etc.), rural comedy, and the beginnings of Victor's vast classical catalog. For the first time it is possible to know what was recorded, when it was recorded, under what numbers it was released (all issues and reissues are shown), and even to gain a suggestion about the quantities manufactured.

The numerical series covered include the early A-1 to 2301; the (mostly) ten-inch 3000's; the 12-inch 31000's; and the rare 14-inch 41000's. (These last-named behemoths were supposed to be played at 60 rpm, yielding up to six minutes of music.) Several other obscure early

numerical blocks are mentioned, though not the extremely rare 12-inch Y-prefix matrices--copies of which have been reported by collectors Bill Bryant and Paul Charosh. There are cross references to later series that contained remakes of the early matrices. Although nearly all information is taken from Victor's own files, the authors have made an effort to check entries against the actual discs and footnote discrepancies. The authors encourage the submission of corrections and additional information for publication as addenda in future volumes.

The 69 pages of introductory material should also be mentioned. There is a clear, concise explanation of the listing format, a brief history of the project, and a detailed discussion of Victor and its numbering practices during the period covered.

As a "special appendix" this volume includes a facsimile reprint of the rare book The Victor Talking Machine Company, by B.L. Aldridge. This was written by a Victor insider during the early 1960's, using company files and contains historical information available nowhere else; it is so revealing that Victor evidently decided against wide distribution and reportedly printed only 50 copies, only one of which is known to exist today.

Much to the dismay of authors Fagan and Moran, the present book's publisher decided to reduce the size of the facsimile's pages by more than 75%, in order to fit four (original) pages on to one page of the current volume. As a result you will need a magnifying glass to read this appendix. It is worth the effort, if you are interested in the first thirty years of the Victor Company. Charts of sales information, chronological highlights, and a short autobiography by Eldridge R. Johnson appear at the end of the facsimile.

In all, this first volume of The Encyclopedic Discography of Victor Recordings must be considered a major addition to the literature on recording history. For anyone interested in the period, or in eventually having the complete Victor files on their shelves, it is essential. One certainly hopes that sales will be sufficient to encourage the publication of subsequent volumes in the series. This is twenty years' worth of research that we don't want to lose.

Tim Brooks

CLYM'S WAGNER DISCOGRAPY

Clym, Wagner: La discographie idéale, des oeuvre de jeunesse à Parsifal. Editions Ramsay (9, Rue du Cherche-Midi, 75006 Paris)., n.d. 75 FF.

This review is admonitory in intent. To paraphrase a famous line of Dorothy Parker's, "la discographie idéale" is the book horrible. Clym, the back cover tells us, is a music critic, founder of the "Cercle national Richard Wagner," and vice-president of the "Académie du disque