

WERM SINCE 1956

By Eric Hughes

So much time has elapsed since the publication of the last volume of WERM in 1956 that many of its potential users, especially those among the younger generation of record collectors, are not aware of its existence, the more so since it has been out-of-print for many years in its country of origin. Yet work on what was intended to be the next supplement has never ceased, and WERM 1956-1985 exists on a vast array of what are appropriately known in the stationery trade as 5" x 3" record cards.

I was closely and increasingly involved with the published WERMs from the time of the production of the typescript of the original volume, and now find that I have completed a further thirty years on this gigantic project, which I have long been pleased to describe, not entirely facetiously, as the most important unpublished book in the world. The 1956 publication dealt with the output of the record companies during 1953-1955. In the early 1960s, the intended 4th and 5th Supplements were being prepared simultaneously. The 4th Supplement was meant to cover the years 1956-1960 and was being made ready for publication while work continued on the succeeding period. It was, however, at this time that the original publishers decided that they could not undertake further publication. Efforts were made to find a replacement publisher but without success, and by 1964, Messrs Clough and Cuming had to admit defeat and were ready to wind up the compilation. WERM might have died but for the fact that I was by then working as cataloguer at the British Institute of Recorded Sound, in London.

At the BIRS, there was not only every reason for an interest in WERM's survival but also an active need for it to continue. The BIRS, then an independent but government-aided body had no complete catalogue of its holdings, a situation which sadly still pertains today when it has become the National Sound Archive, part of the British Library. The WERM cards, by then being compiled largely single-handed by myself as an extra-curricular activity, were an important source of information both in locating records to serve intending listeners, to provide record illustrations for public lectures, to answer everyday enquiries relating to recordings, and to pinpoint important gaps in the Institute's collection, at the time a very modest one by present standards. Finally, in 1966, it came about that the BIRS was able to purchase the copyright of the prepared material from the original authors and the compilation of the work became an officially recognised activity on the Institute's premises.

There was no question of maintaining WERM at a high level of inclusiveness without a heavy commitment to the task outside normal work hours. It was fortunate, therefore, that the already

ingrained patterns of devoting time to the task at week-ends, on dally train journeys, in pre-breakfast sessions, etc., which might have killed enthusiasm, were harnessed to a subject which proved endlessly fascinating as the size of the compilation grew while the LP repertoire expanded far beyond what the gramophone had already encompassed in its previous half-century and more. Enthusiasm alone might not have been enough without the prospect of publication, but the knowledge that the BIRS would have had great difficulty in functioning smoothly without the card index was probably a crucial factor.

The problems the authors faced in compiling earlier volumes were not made less as the output of discs surged mightily not only on both sides of the Atlantic but also in many countries which had not hitherto made substantial contributions to recorded music. WERM had come to rely heavily on a constant stream of information from record companies the world over and from individual correspondents and enthusiastic record collectors whose detective work answered many questions regarding contents of records and identities of music recorded. With the withdrawal from the enterprise of Francis Clough, who had looked after this side of the work, amongst so much else, much of this flow of information began to dry up and eventually it ceased, while lack of time and requisite staff at the BIRS made it impossible wholly to fill the gap.

Similarly the great expansion of the repertoire made demands on printed reference sources that the slender budget of the Institute was unable to satisfy. Even such basic works as Schneider/Bach and Kochel Mozart were not on hand until the early 70s. Nevertheless, attendance at the BIRS often made the actual discs readily available, while the existence of London of several specialist record stores staffed by knowledgeable enthusiasts often provided a sight of elusive or otherwise unknown discs; the BIRS devoted as great a part as possible of its limited purchasing funds to the acquisition of such material. When purchase was not possible, hasty jottings had to be made of frequently complex record sleeve information. (This was before the wide availability of photo-copiers made life much easier.)

It was at this stage, when I had come to the conclusion that the musicological problems were so great that the WERM could only be looked upon as reference material within the BIRS, and not as a source for future publication, that a former member of the WERM III team made a reappearance. This was Angela Noble, now Angela Evans, our former research editor. From the early 70s, she put at my disposal much of her time, her formidable knowledge of the repertoire and of sources, and her large and specialised collection of discs and printed materials. She answered many specific questions, involved herself in the seeking out of further necessary publications, to say nothing of the purchase of further recordings. In addition she compiled many check lists of works by composers for whom such information could not readily be found

in printed form. All this was before the eventual publication of the long-awaited New Grove solved some such problems and underlined the existence of many more.

Given the size of the task of keeping track of the huge output of recordings of the LP era and of the discographical problems involved, it is not surprising that, as far as in known, no one else has come forward to grapple with WERM's task on a similar scale. There have, of course, been a number of excellent discographies of individual composers which have become very useful tools, but in sum they can hardly have dealt with more than a small proportion of the repertoire (no one has been brave enough to tackle, for example, a complete Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms or Schubert discography) and they have the disadvantage being out of date from the different periods of their publication whilst WERM's performance has to advance on all fronts simultaneously.

A number of these discographies have in fact emanated from WERM sources. In 1972, BIRS published a Monteverdi discography based partly on the relevant WERM material, and I contributed to the pages of the Institute's journal, Recorded Sound, discographies devoted to Medtner, Holst, Ireland, Grainger and other composers. In more recent years, the same journal has presented a series devoted to contemporary British composers. In such discographies, the WERM field has in fact been extended since they have attempted to include, where necessary, acoustic recordings which were only exceptionally listed in WERM, and, in addition, the Archive's holdings of non-commercial recordings on disc or tape, including broadcasts, especially from BBC sources.

Among discographers working outside the Archive, none has been more active than Mr. J. F. Weber who, in a series first published by himself and including several compilations contributed by others, and later in the pages of Fanfare, has maintained high discographical standards. Two important and substantial volumes published by the Phonotheque National (Paris) have been devoted to Faure and Poulenc respectively. In a number of instances, WERM has made its own contribution when compilers approached the BIRS before going into print, so that I was able to examine and add to the existing drafts. I hasten to add that this was a two-way process which often solved some of my own problems.

It is worth referring here to a number of discographies arranged on a national basis. American Music Recordings, published in 1982 by the Institute for Studies in American Music, was unfortunately restricted to the music of the twentieth century and failed to deal fully with recordings of such music outside the USA, but it covered many more composers than had been dealt with in one volume since WERM 3. Similarly, contemporary Belgian recorded music has been substantially listed in Ce Be De M and Its Affiliated Composers (Brussels, 1977-80). Slightly different was the 800 page Melodiya catalogue by John R. Bennette

(Greenwood Press, 1981), flawed, but informative; this dealt with composers internationally but was restricted to USSR issues.

These varied publications have frequently illustrated the problems of working on discographies retrospectively. All too often recordings of limited circulation not listed in standard catalogues, such as Schwann and Bielefelder, more especially those appearing in the smaller countries, quickly disappear from sight and are excessively hard to trace. It has always been obvious that only a few months cessation of work on WERM would be fatal to the enterprise.

The third Supplement of WERM saw the latter days of the 78 rpm disc and the beginning of pre-recorded tapes. Stereo was yet to come. Some readers may be surprised to learn that the card-index contains a fair smattering of 78s which were still appearing in the 1950s. Reel-to-reel tape has made less of an impact than once seemed likely and eventually it proved impossible to note catalogue numbers for such issues, save where they were solely in that form. A similar decision had to be made for the much more numerous issues of cassettes. Recently there has been the significant introduction of the compact disc. Till now, lack of time has precluded the inclusion in WERM of compact discs save where they are peculiar to that form.

With the recent retirement of the present writer from full-time employment at the NSA, the time seems more than ever ripe for the publication of the work of 30 years. Whether, and in what form, the work can be successfully carried on beyond this point is not clear. It may be that we will shortly see the demise of the conventional LP, though, more probably, it will continue with a smaller output for some years to come. Ideally, it would be convenient if such standard records were to be incorporated in an eventual publication of the existing compilation, but it might prove more practical if further WERMs were to be devoted largely to the CD with LPs as the exceptions they may become.

Publication has always seemed to me to be highly desirable, if appropriate standards could be achieved, and in the best interests of the NSA. It would be a much more convenient reference source in the form of printed volumes than in its present state where it is not always readily comprehended by those not familiar with the published WERM volumes nor with frequent reference to the cards. Just as significantly, it seems essential that the long-term needs of those who use recordings either professionally or for pleasure should be served by the preservation of material which is not otherwise likely ever to become available in such depth. The NSA is certainly in favour not merely in preservation but also in a publication which might bring a useful income at a time when government funding provides an only modest annual increase.

Preparing the material for publication would certainly require extra funding from some source yet to be tapped. In the

meantime, I have undertaken to commence the task of editing the existing material, whilst at the same time incorporating new entries and attempting to solve problems as they arise. Such work would advance more quickly if it were to be shared with a new and knowledgeable collaborator (a luxury unknown on a day-to-day basis for some twenty years) whose value would increase with a familiarity with the modus operandi. In such a way, it should be possible eventually to produce a draft of the whole work which could be utilised by a specially recruited team of editorial specialists to prompt their own expert comments, suggestions, and corrections. This is an ambitious project which might necessitate eight or more volumes compared with the single one of the 3rd Supplement, and a project which calls for a great deal of dedicated effort by those who might be involved. For WERM, however, such was always the case. Dr. Geoffrey Cuming, whose reminiscences are to be found in this issue, is still happily available for consultation and it is perhaps a remarkable fact that after thirty years, three of the team of four who were mainly responsible for WERM III could be part of the editorial team for a future publication.