

## O PIONEER! (A HALF CENTURY LATER)

By R. D. Darrell

(The following essay is a revised version of an address delivered by Mr. Darrell at the annual ARSC conference banquet in New York City, April 19, 1986)

In recent years, despite Satchel Paige's warning, "Don't look back," the temptation for me to do so has become irresistible. And, sure enough, someone has been gaining on me: an unnerving Doppelganger, the ghost of my own younger self.

I find that part of the cost of simple survival (one cheap enough, considering the alternative) is having to relive the past. And that makes for disturbing comparisons between then and now, especially when--by quite unique happenstance--one's first major achievement hit a jackpot that never again could possibly be matched. Like Rachmaninoff with his (the) Prelude in C sharp minor, I have been and always will be stuck with a triumph that is also a burden: my record encyclopedia of a half-century ago.

I didn't suspect the burden at first. It wasn't until my work was eclipsed by the far greater one of Clough and Cuming in 1952, and I incredulously read the generous tribute with which they began their World's Encyclopedia, that I began to feel like a Historical Monument. It was like reading my own epitaph, carved in stone:

The principles and procedures of discography were laid down by R. D. Darrell in his Gramophone Encyclopedia of Recorded Music (New York, 1936) and have been followed by subsequent compilers; the present work is planned on similar lines, and we must acknowledge, what is indeed obvious, the inspiration and instruction we have derived from Darrell's work.

Wow! I had thought that I was just compiling a useful catalogue raisonne, certainly not bringing down the Law from Heaven! Being thus practically immortalized made me then, and still, feel very ancient indeed...cautioning me never to start a day's work before carefully checking, like George Bernard Shaw, that the Time's obituary columns didn't include my own name.

My incurably quirky memory also dredges up a possibly pertinent dialogue from a British novelty dance record of the mid-30s: the New Mayfair Orchestra's HMV masterpiece "In the Bushes at the Bottom of the Garden"--not to be confused with Bea Lillie's immortal "There are Fairies at the Bottom of Our Garden." Here, it's a venerable Anglican Vicar who has to be helped by an even more superannuated, rustic ditchdigger over the

new drain across the aforesaid garden-bottom. The apologetic Vicar: "Once I could leap it with ease, but now, alas, Anno Domini creeps on apace!" The sympathetic ditchdigger: "Aye, they're creepin' on me too, but I never knew the Latin name for them."

Of course, every Old-Timer no matter how decrepit, has a tale to tell. And since we are celebrating its 50th anniversary, I'm primed to Reveal All about the origins of my near-legendary, faded-Blue Book. Perhaps some of you have never seen what a candid friend described as looking for all the world like a machine-tool catalogue.

Who was crazy enough to hire me to create it? What credentials did I have for the job? How did I start? How come it's shaped as it is? Above all, why was it so ecstatically--entirely uncritically--received at the time. I'll try to answer such questions as honestly as I can.

The Unsung Hero and Prime Mover of the story is one of the greatest record salesmen/promoters of all time: William H. (Bill) Tyler, who, with a more conservative partner, Joe Brogan, founded The Gramophone Shop in 1928, and soon made it the New York mecca for collectors of imported as well as domestic releases. Trying to rival or surpass the mail-order business of H. Royer Smith in Philadelphia, the shop had issued (1929 and 1931) two fat paper-back catalogues boastfully titled "encyclopedias." By the spring of 1934, Tyler was ambitiously dreaming of a much larger, perhaps even hard-cover successor, that would be more truly encyclopedic in scope.

Perhaps he picked me because the able, earlier cataloguer, Richard Gilbert, was then managing G. Schirmer's record/phonograph department, or perhaps because I, then writing the New York Band Instrument Company's Music Lover's Guide, was showing the symptoms of having been badly bitten by the deadly Taxonomic Virus. Earlier, when the pioneering Phonograph Monthly Review was running as a two-man operation, with my writing under various pseudonyms supplying all the reviews (purportedly "By Our Staff Critics") and much else, I was wont to fill out the correspondence columns, and provoke real letters, by writing as "A Delian," "Ravel Fan," or "Sibelian," etc., listing what was then available from these composers and suggesting what other works should be recorded. For the MLG, I ran a series of expanded lists--what we'd now call specialized subject discographies: recorded symphonies, concertos, chamber music, Elizabethan music, American composers, etc.

Thus what I had to start out with in late May, 1934, was this nucleus, augmented by the review files of the PMR, MLG, Gramophone, French and Philadelphian Disques (with a large and small "d" respectively). To the Gramophone Shop's own catalogues and mimeographed monthly new-release lists, I added, as soon as we could obtain them, two copies each (for clipping) of every

available world-wide record manufacturer's catalogues. Pasted and typed on 4 x 6 cards, these were my raw materials--and they were raw indeed! Only veteran collectors can remember what catalogues, and record labelling itself, were like in those days. I devoted nearly a page of my Preface to the specifics of the musical illiteracies I had to contend with. Irving Kolodin, in his New York Sun review, wrote more tersely of "the incredible miscellany of information and misinformation, effusion and reticence, which is the sum of the commercial catalogues."

Don't forget what tools we didn't have then. No American Schwann, British Gramophone or German Bielefelder comprehensive catalogues! No Einstein revision of Kochel's Mozart. No Schmieder Bach or Deutsch Schubert. No Hoboken or Robbins Landon Haydn. No Burghauser Dvorak, Kirkpatrick Scarlatti, Pincherle or Ryom Vivaldi. Not even Charles Cudworth's blacklist of musical counterfeits: "Ye Old Spuriousity Shoppe, Or, Put in the Anhang." Only the 3rd edition of Grove's and 4th of Baker--both still awaiting Slonimsky's revisions--offered some help.

The full dimensions of so rash a project began to be terrifyingly evident. But Tyler had been warned when he first approached a potential publisher, one of his own best customers, the musical connoisseur Alfred A. Knopf, who told Tyler that he'd gladly pay \$50 (or some such then-preposterous price) for such a book, but that he'd never dream of publishing it. And I had added my own cautionary warnings about the likely time and expense that would be involved.

But Tyler blithely plunged ahead with publication on his own. Brogan undoubtedly had qualms, but I can't remember Tyler ever pressing me to hurry up or to reduce the ambitious scale the project was fast assuming. What Tyler worried most about was winning what he felt was the musical respectability guaranteed by the imprimatur of the Supreme Music Authority of the time: Lawrence Gilman. And I didn't need to be told that the way to Gilman's heart would be how I dealt with Debussy, Mussorgsky, and above all, Wagner. Hence the explanation of my being allowed to take so much time and care with their entries--accounting for every recorded (and unrecorded) bar of the whole Ring, for example. It worked. Shown the typescript copy of these entries, Gilman readily agreed to provide a sanctioning Foreword.

Now I regret, even more than I did at the time, that I couldn't have been as thorough with every major composer, but that didn't seem practical then. What I worried most about-- apart from including every classical record I could find and trying somehow to identify its contents--was devising a typographical entry scheme that would provide a maximum of useful information in a minimum of space. Luckily, in what was still the tag-end of the Great Depression, printers were so hungry for a job like this that they gladly set up a variety of experimental schemes until I got one to satisfy me. (My belief then, and now, is that no reference book is read in the normal way; it is

searched for specific information, and that search can be facilitated by the typographical arrangements that best lead the eye to find--in the order of likely precedence--just what one's seeking.

One of the two great ironies about the final realization of the project was, in the event, that the typographical schemes I had labored over longer and harder than almost anything else were only rarely and lightly included in the otherwise near-rapturous praise for the finished book. Nevertheless, I've always been convinced that they were vital factors in the Encyclopedia's usefulness.

On the other hand, perhaps no feature was more often and enthusiastically lauded than one which was a kind of afterthought and which I had taken least seriously. This was the prefacing of each entry with a usually brief, italicized, introductory note. These didn't figure at all in my initial plans, but as the work grew I found that some entries needed special explanations. Some more obscure composers needed historical/biographical "placing," but it became evident that, to be consistent, every entry had to have an introductory note.

No one could have been more flabbergasted than I when almost every reviewer, and many reader-correspondents since, especially relished these almost casual, quite non-objective annotations. Even the great music librarian, Mary Lawton, in her "Dictionaries of Music" entry in Thompson's International Cyclopedia of Music, singled them out for "catching the attention of the music lover who might never trouble to read a book of biography, but in this manner may learn to evaluate the composers whose works he admires." So much for knowing just what one's doing!

But at the time I gave the impression of knowing what I was doing, and so I enjoyed an intoxicating freedom of action. Ignoring the dangerous lack of any real model and a knowledgeable editor to correct my errors and provide advice, I gloried in the leeway I was given to make--however arbitrarily--my own decisions. One-man projects on this scale have become practically impossible in the present age of committees, commissions, and consensus! Kurtz Myers, in his Record Ratings Notes installments and book cumulations, remains one of the rare exceptions. Probably only he and I can fully appreciate Haydn's memorable tribute to the independence he enjoyed at Esterhaza:

I could make experiments, observe what produced an effect and what weakened it, and was thus in a position to improve, alter, make additions and omissions, and be as bold as I pleased. I was cut off from the world, there was no one to confuse or torment me, and I was forced to become original.

To be sure, completion of the project often seemed an impossible dream indeed. I'd wake up in the middle of the night,

sweating in terror, from a nightmare of falling ill or suffering an accident that would leave all the work I'd done that far in Limbo, with no one to make sense of the fragments or form them in a finished whole. But finally, after some 2,000 in-advance-of-publication orders had piled up (at the now ridiculous price of only \$2 a copy), the printed copies actually materialized around July 1st, 1936--nearly simultaneously, incidently, with a pioneering, specialized discography, Julian Morton Moses' Record Collectors Guide to Columbia and Victor Celebrity records from 1903-1912. Reviews promptly came flooding in, not only without exception favorable, but also, for the most part, incredibly non-critical Raves.

Now, I have too well-developed an ego to be overly modest, but even I realize that the extravagant reception of the Encyclopedia only could be explained by larger considerations than the absolute value of my own contributions. The intensity of the cumulative need for such a book, the perfect timing of its appearance, and its impressively massed evidence of the then generally unsuspected scope of the existing recorded repertory all had to combine to win for so unprecedented a venture so unprecedented a welcome.

Among the passionate discophiles and record reviewers of the time, the joy of at last having a comprehensive survey of their realm was so extreme that many of them simply abandoned their usual sobriety and sense of restraint. The veteran British Gramophone critic, W.R. Anderson, uncharacteristically exclaimed "I don't know what high honors America has to confer, but I bid up to the Vice-Presidency for Mr Darrell." (Anderson's knowledge of this country must have been limited, even though he had visited here and had collaborated on a number of fine music history/appreciation books with Howard D. McKinney of Rutgers. Certainly he didn't know FDR's vice-president, Jack Garner's evaluation of the office: "Not worth a bucket of warm spit!") Another British authority, W. McNaught, writing in the Musical Times, was only a little more restrained:

Mr R D Darrell [who] must be a quick worker to have got through the job in one lifetime, deserves more reward than he will get in this world for this patience and thoroughness, and for his initiative in a system that fits his material...His system, in fact, takes six pages to explain, and none of the provisions so fully, and therefore so clearly set forth, is unnecessary.

Even the formidable American music and art critic, Alfred Frankenstein, went hyperbolic:

A Herculean job...a work of scholarship and a labor of love...It is by no means an exaggeration to say

that Mr. Darrell has done for his restricted field what Grove's does for all music or Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music does for its particular territory.

Can you believe?

Needless to say, all this was the sweetest of blarney to a youngster's vanity. And though I tried to take it with a grain of salt, I can't deny that--initially--mine was a Jack Hornerish reaction: having pulled out a plum the first time I stuck in my thumb, I naturally concluded, "What a bright boy am I." It was only much later I discovered the disheartening truth of how rare such a freak success actually is. I believe that I worked harder, planned more imaginatively, and organized my materials better in my Schirmer's Guide to Books on Music and Musicians and the Good Listening of the early 50s, but, while these were quite favorably received, they never even began to arouse the worldwide rave reactions (nearly full-page Japanese and Dutch newspaper reviews, for example) of my Encyclopedia. Like many others, I learned to my sorrow that hard work is no substitute for a gimmick...and that no gimmicks are more potent than priority, timeliness, and sheer luck! Few explorers have the incomparable good fortune of finding a Promised Land/New World on their first pioneering voyage. And while I lay no claim to be a Founding Father of the Art and Science of Discography (paternity in such cases is never easy to establish beyond reasonable doubts), I'm very proud to have been, as it were, "present at the creation."

And then to have had the good sense to retire promptly on whatever discographic laurels I may have (deservedly or undeservedly) won. Pioneers are notoriously poor colonizers. Anyway, there's been no lack of colonizers. As Fernand Braudel notes in the preface to the second edition of his monumental The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, "Any work of synthesis...inspires a new crop of specialized research. Such research did not fail to follow in the wake of my book. It began by following my footsteps and now has completely overwhelmed me." Such subsequent work is what ARSC's and other discographers are so impressively piling up nowadays. In saluting it with the liveliest admiration--and perhaps just a trace of envy--I'm still very glad that I did my stint (once and for all) long ago.

For now I can look back, not without pride, to the time long ago when I was given the rare and precious opportunity to speak out for early discophiles, to pioneer in mapping and exploring their new world, and to give them (in my Encyclopedia's epigraph) a still-unmatched expression of the joys and rewards of record-listening: Thomas Mann's in his Magic Mountain. There Hans Castorp discovers

A World to conquer, large enough that even to

survey it was a difficult task at first, and bewildering; yet a world of beautiful possibilities...all imaginable music, the happiest inspirations from every region of the art.

Hans Castorp's thoughts, or rather his prophetic half-thoughts, soared high, as he sat there in night and silence before his truncated sarcophagus of music. They soared higher than his understanding. They were alchemistically enhanced. And so may ours always be!