

BOOK REVIEWS

Paul W. Worth and Jim Cartwright, John McCormack: A Comprehensive Discography. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986. lli, + 184 pp + 2 unnumbered leaves. ISBN 0-313-24728-5 (hardbound).

John McCormack, without any just doubt, is one of the giants in the performance annals of both "classical" and popular vocal music of this century, with a phonographic output (of fearsome proportions) to match. The size of the Irish tenor's production for the phonograph makes a review of this book an intimidating task, which accounts for my tardiness in putting it into the editor's hands. The collaborators, after all, have set out to provide a complete discography of McCormack's cylinders, discs, test pressings, electrical transcriptions, soundtracks, and even of the massive representation of these on transfers (especially to LP). Of the two partners, Jim Cartwright, listed second on the title page, is probably better known to ARSC members for his long years of sales of recordings through his Immortal Performances mail order catalogues, which incorporated many fine and valuable discographies which he authored to enrich its pages. Both men, however, have an obviously deep grasp of the nature of systematic discography, its sources, literature, and methodology, as these pages amply demonstrate. They also have a keen appreciation for their subject and for the industry and public for which McCormack recorded, even if they do not quite do the kind of justice to McCormack's non-classical recordings that Gordon T. Ledbetter achieved in his study, The Great Irish Tenor (Scribner's), written also very much from a "record man's" perspective.

Worth's and Cartwright's discography, and its excellent introductory chapters, seem too superior in quality and trustworthiness to require much here beyond description, unless the Journal's many qualified readers can succeed in uncovering errors and omissions of any real importance eluding these eyes. It seems safe, after all, to ignore most of the copious notes taken to prepare this review, given the solid merit that the book manifests.

The main body of the discography is the "Recording Chronology", listing the recordings, session by session. The level of detail is admirably thorough, unusually so for a discography of an artist identified with the "classical" idiom, at least so far as current interest in McCormack tends to run. The chronology's listing is not just of matrices, but also of the original and later issues. Details on the studio sessions include even such highly practical matters as precise playing speeds (of issues, that is, from the original matrices rather than from dubs of them), the matter of speeds having already been discussed in a general manner on pages xlii-xliii. A keying to LP and 45 rpm microgroove reissues also enables the book to serve the needs of collectors indifferent to the finer points of discographical science but wishing to find such clues to properly identifying the records which they own. Along

these lines, a discussion (p. xxi) of the sources and nature of distortion in recording McCormack's voice, contrasting the results of British and American studios, is also of practical use, particularly to the many owners of the original 78 rpm issues, as well as to those who may seek to ameliorate these problems in making tapes or even producing reissues. It is heartening to know that anyone contemplating LP or CD reissues will have such a full guide not only to McCormack's published output but also to the yet many unreleased recordings and alternates.

Following the chronology, recordings are listed in other ways. First is an alphabetical listing, gratefully replete with cross-references to other title forms, keyed to the chronology by citing date of recording session and also matrix number; titles recorded several times are separately indexed for each recording. The section "Microgroove Reissues" and "Appendix A: 78 rpm Albums and Sets" list these kinds of reissues and compilations by label and number. The novice, by resorting to the list of "Issue Number Prefixes: Microgroove Recordings", can easily find the key to go from the alpha-numerical issue number indication in the chronology to the first of these sections to find fuller details on LP and 45 rpm EP reissues under label name. (The microgroove reissues include many specialty labels, not just the better-known "legitimate" and more safely legal reissues, which anyone knowing Cartwright's expertise in this area indeed would expect.)

Of the other valuable appendices, "Appendix C: Aural Differences in Alternate Takes" is useful to discographer and general collector alike, giving clues to distinguishing traits of many (though far from all) of the "takes", making it possible for the antiquarian collector to identify the matrix from which his 78 rpm copy derives and for the owner of microgroove and tape reissues to pinpoint the source recordings drawn upon. (A recent publication, similarly describing the particularities of a jazz singer's alternate takes, mostly by reference to the instrumental contribution, is Marvin Eker's Billie Holiday's Columbia, Vocalion, Okeh Recording Sessions, 1936-1942: the Alternate "Takes", (Montréal Vintage Music Society, 1988.) There is even a guide to ferreting out the anonymous Canadian Compo Co., 78 rpm, "pirate" releases and to distinguishing them from Compo replacements by other tenors of anonymous identity, maintained in the catalogues on the same label names and issue numbers.

The discography is one of the few that shows hopeful signs that discography in the "classical" realm is gradually coming of age, rising to the long-standing challenge to excellence that the large body of scholarly and genuinely thorough work in jazz and "entertainment" discography poses. The format of Worth and Cartwright's book serves well as a model to future efforts, and not least of all for its convenience in use and logical organization.

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