

WILLIAM H. SELTSAM (1897-1968)

The passing of William H. Seltsam at the age of 71, December 27, 1968, brought a most fruitful life to its close. Everyone with an interest in opera knows of his valiant work compiling the Metropolitan Opera Annals and its two supplements; record collectors must ever be grateful to him for conceiving, establishing and maintaining, sometimes against discouraging odds, the International Record Collectors' Club. These two great achievements will keep his memory alive, though I doubt it is generally realized how much he did, working on them, toward establishing standards. It is true that the Annals has its errata lists, and that as a pioneer in the field of record reissues he learned many things the hard way, but how many of us would ever have had the patience or the imagination to undertake and carry through such tasks?

I am sure many of Bill's friends have been surprised to learn that his first interest was in the dance. Living in Bridgeport, he came into New York as a young man to study with Mordkin and Tarassoff. It was characteristic that he dedicated himself to the interpretation of contemporary music, which as he said "was at that time sadly neglected." I do not know how far this career actually progressed, but according to his own account he worked first with a pianist, then discovered he could enlarge his scope by using the newly invented Brunswick Panatrope, the first all-electrical phonograph. Those were exciting days, with the whole field of recording revolutionized by the microphone and with a rapidly expanding repertoire made possible by new methods of reproduction. But this phase of his life came to an abrupt end when he found he was losing his hearing. It must have been about this time he went to work in the office of the Acme Shears Company. He held a job for many years, devoting his spare time to the things that interested him most.

There is in the files of the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives at Lincoln Center a copy of the original announcement of IRCC. Rubber-stamped with the date 21 November 1931, this informally typed slip must have been posted on the Music Division bulletin board, for also rubber-stamped are the words DO NOT REMOVE. The announcement, headed HISTORICAL-RECORD-OF-THE-MONTH CLUB, announces plans for the reissuing of rare and important discs by Victor Maurel, Edvard Grieg, Joseph Joachim, Vincent d'Indy, Xavier Scharwenka, Ferruccio Busoni, Emma Albani, Johannes Sembach and Edouard de Reszke. Within a few months IRCC was launched with a couple of unpublished recordings made by Geraldine Farrar in 1922 and 1923. The name of Miss Farrar, rather than those on the preliminary announcement, indicates the direction IRCC was to take. This may reflect Bill Seltsam's own developing interests; certainly it was in line with the overall trend of collecting. Even the greatest instrumentalists have never been featured by IRCC.

In other ways that first release was prophetic. Geraldine Farrar was to become a kind of patron saint of the Club. Certainly no other artist was so favored in the number of recordings issued. Quite a few of her IRCC discs were First Editions, and as we can see, Bill's ability to unearth unpublished recordings was indicated at the very outset. IRCC No. 1 set another trend, in that it was autographed by the artist; most of the singers

still on hand to sign their names on labels were induced to do so for the Club. And like a true limited edition, each individual disc was numbered, making it unique.

But in writing about Bill Seltsam for the membership of ARSC, I want especially to point out what he did in the interests of honest labeling and documentation. He realized perhaps earlier than most of us that records are documents -- a basic principle upon which our own organization is built. From the very first issue, IRCC labels bore the exact recording dates, and wherever possible this information was supplied with subsequent releases. IRCC No. 2 was a splendid example of documentation, combining Melba's 1904 Caro nome with the Salce, salce recorded in Covent Garden at her farewell, 8 June 1926. The name of the conductor on the latter occasion is duly given -- Vincenzo Bellezza. And, for a further refinement, the white labels (a continuation, I suppose, of Victor's white-label pressings of out-of-print discs, which had been available for a time at catalog prices) indicated acoustic and electrical recording respectively by the so-called "plain" and "scroll" designs. The first issues of IRCC were direct pressings from original masters. When in the course of time dubbings were made of otherwise unavailable material, not only the original date but also the year of re-recording was given. And it should also be noted that on the periodic lists of still-available IRCC discs such re-recordings were indicated by the symbol (R).

It took some of us years to realize the importance of correct speed and its effect on pitch and quality. I suppose every collector must remember his sudden realization that this or that recording, when the speed had been corrected, was not so bad after all. Of course as long as Bill was dealing in direct pressings there was nothing he could do about this -- one bit of information he did not furnish for obvious reasons was the actual recording speed -- but as he began to copy rare originals he came to realize that corrections were possible. As we all know, it is not always easy to determine the proper speed and pitch, but he made a valiant effort. I recently came on several letters I had from him, taking issue on this point. Unfortunately I no longer know exactly what I wrote to him. Occasionally something got by in this, and I can think of one instance in which a label was incorrectly printed. I have a letter in which he tells me Leo Riemens has written correcting some biographical information in one of his bulletins. In case I was going to review the disc he wanted me to have it all straight. It is saddening to realize how many of his followers in the reissue field have produced careless and incorrect work, both in pitching and in labeling.

A new chapter in the history of the Club opened with the discovery of the Mapleson Cylinders. As all of my readers must know, these came to light in the mid-thirties in the possession of Alfred Mapleson, the opera librarian, having been made by his uncle and predecessor, Lionel, during performances at the Metropolitan between 1901 and 1903. In September 1937 IRCC had announced the successful transfer of some Edison cylinders to discs (the artist was Blanche Arral) and by December 1939 the greater challenge of the Mapleson collection had been met.

One of the first Mapleson discs presented the great unrecorded Jean de Reszke in a couple of snatches from L'Africaine and Siegfried. For the first time it was possible for collectors to hear at least an echo of this legendary voice. Unfortunately the lesson of correcting pitches had not yet been learned, and though the original ten-inch disc may now be a collector's item, it requires a good deal of adjustment for a proper hearing. Needless to say, better and corrected dubbings were later issued, and with the other Jean de Reszke fragments these may still be had on an IRCC LP.

Of the many exciting discoveries down the years, perhaps none is more intriguing than a 7-inch private recording made by Schumann-Heink at about the turn of the century. The record had been known to exist, for it heads the list of the contralto's recordings in the Bauer catalog. The title is correct as given -- Wie ein Grössen -- but the song is attributed to Franz. A copy of this little disc had been turned up by the late Reverend Harlan Kishpaugh, who offered it to IRCC for dubbing. But Bill was unwilling to issue it without full knowledge of what he had, and it was certainly no Franz song. He brought the disc to me at the Library for possible identification. As it happened the search was less difficult than expected, for the Music Division has a large collection of Schumann-Heink programs. Thus we could change the attribution from Franz to Adolf Mehrkens.

The moral to be drawn from Bill's lifework is that certain standards exist and for a man of integrity no amount of research is too much when it is a question of meeting these standards. That IRCC, the first in the field, is still in operation after 38 years is certainly significant. A few of its followers are producing successfully along similar lines, but many others have come and gone. Not one of them can match IRCC for longevity, quantity and consistent quality. I am happy to say the Club still plans to carry on. I wish it long life in the traditions of its founder.

-- Philip L. Miller

PETER HUGH REED (1892-1969)

Peter Hugh Reed, founder-editor of the longest continuously existing independent critical record magazine in the United States, died on September 25, 1969 after a lengthy illness. Founded as The American Music Lover in May of 1935, Peter Hugh Reed's magazine (later rechristened The American Record Guide) remained for more than a decade the only substantial journal of its kind in this country. Only token rivalry was offered by such house organs as the Gramophone Shop Supplement (New York City) under the editorship of the redoubtable and still very much functioning R. D. Darrell and The New Records