

Classical Music Discographies, 1976-1988: A Bibliography. By Michael Gray. Discographies, No. 34; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989. 334 pp. ISBN 0-313-25942-9. \$45.00.

This *Journal* published its most recent bibliography of classical discographies in Vol. 17. It closed with the year 1985, supplementing the first volume of R. R. Bowker's *Bibliography of Discographies* (reviewed in *ARSC Journal* Vol. X, Nos. 2-3, p. 297-298) and three intervening supplements published in this *Journal*. Now we have a single source to consult in place of the four previous supplements, and it adds three more years of coverage as well.

There are two main problems with published discographies. They range from excellent to worthless, and they appear in a bewildering variety of books, appendices to books, periodicals, pamphlets, and ephemera (record booklets, concert programs, and such). This bibliography attempts valiantly (and quite successfully) to cope with the second problem. In its format it also makes a small dent in the first problem, identifying the kind of elements most often found in the more scholarly discographies by assigning identifying numbers to such features of a good discography as the inclusion of release dates, matrix and take numbers, indexes, and place and date of recording.

Since the Bowker Volume, I covered the period from 1925 to 1975, we now have an index to virtually all of the discographies published up to the recent past, for the present volume includes some items overlooked before. The new volume overcomes some of the problems posed by the subject headings of the first one, but there are so many subject discographies that it's hardly possible to do anything but read through the book carefully, making mental notes of what to look for. Otherwise, composers and performers are listed in one alphabetically and also identified by nationality and function.

To my mind, almost as important as the seven annotated points of inclusion is the indication of how many pages the work takes up. I checked "Chants--Plain, Gregorian, etc." to see what I could learn. The most extensive entry (published in 1983) occupied pages 214-19 of an Italian periodical. Even if I had not already seen the article, I would know that it might be worth looking at but could hardly be very thorough. (It is also very accurate, as it happens.)

There are endless ways of using this book, all of them important. If one is going to tackle the discography of a composer or performer, it is smart to look up the previous attempts (the least one can do is improve on them). If one is going to attempt a discography of a vocalist who recorded, say, a lot of Wolf songs, it would be smart to check to see if there is a Wolf discography that gives dates of recording or release (there is) or vice versa.

Serious record collectors need discographies, but they need this book in order to find them. It has to be read through, however, or its content will sometimes evade discovery. I wish I had published my latest work in time for inclusion. Now I may have to wait another decade to see it listed. *Reviewed by J. F. Weber*

Pop Memories. By Joel Whitburn. (Record Research Inc., 1986). 657 pp.

This is a dangerous book. Readers are all too familiar with cases of inaccurate, sometimes wildly inaccurate, information that got into print under seemingly reliable

auspices, then was repeated by careless authors until it became, in most people's minds, fact. It can take generations for the truth to catch up. Sometimes it never does. Edison's false date for the invention of the phonograph (August 12, 1877) comes to mind, as do many other bogus historical "facts." Here is a book full of misleading information, presented in such a factual, almost statistical manner that it is bound to be quoted. This has already begun to happen. A presentation at the 1987 ARSC Conference was based in part on this book¹; a 1988 article in an academic journal drew significant conclusions from one of its more patently erroneous listings²; and it continued to be cited as a source in 1989³ *Pop Memories'* claims to be an index of the best selling record charts from 1890 to 1954. It documents with great precision the best sellers by each artist during that 65 year period, showing each artist's "chart" titles, the date each record reached the charts, highest position attained, and weeks on the chart. The author, Joel Whitburn, is well-known for his excellent series of indexes of modern *Billboard* record charts. These are highly regarded, and deservedly so; they are models of precision, exhibiting the care of an indexer who double-checks everything. (Whitburn reportedly obtained original copies of every one of the 10,000-plus singles that have appeared on *Billboard's* rock-era charts, simply to verify label copy.) This author has been buying Whitburn's *Billboard* indexes since they first were published, and would recommend them to anyone interested in the field. They are carefully crafted, and improve with each edition. *Pop Memories*, however, is another matter. The problem, of course, is that best seller charts did not exist during most of the first 50 years of commercial recording. Whitburn simply made them up. (He implies, but never actually says this, in his misleading and hype-filled introduction.) Unfortunately, he didn't do it very well. Although *Pop Memories* is widely advertised and sold, apparently only one analytic review has ever appeared--by this writer in 1987⁴. It proved rather negative, which brought an angry and emotional response from the author. Out of the subsequent exchange came a great deal of information about the book's sources and methodology that had not been revealed to the book's buyers. Since the \$50 volume continues to be actively promoted and, unfortunately, quoted (in fact a second edition is planned) it seems appropriate to revisit it here, with new information not found in its introduction.

MISREPRESENTED SOURCES

First, a look at sources. Many impressive-looking primary sources are cited in the introduction (pp. 7-10), but on close examination they do not contain the chart information the author says they do. *The Phonogram* (1891-1893), the industry's first trade paper, is said to have provided "invaluable information on records and artists of the early 1890s." In fact, this was a monthly that dealt almost exclusively with business matters, and made only rare and vague references to the musical cylinders being produced then. There are no record listings of any kind, no reports on individual record sales, and nothing that in one's wildest imagination could be used to document ranked sales charts. *The Phonoscope* (1896-1900) is said to have "printed monthly lists of top popular recordings (although not in precise rank or chart form)." This is simply not true. *The Phonoscope's* list was clearly titled "list of new records...sent us by the leading talking machine companies" and had nothing to do with popularity. The author has since said he assumed a record was popular when its title was repeated from month to month; however, *The Phonoscope* either repeated the entire list, or substantial contiguous chunks of it, not individual titles. The publication apparently was repeating a company's whole supplement when no new one was received." Sheet music sales" is cited

as a source, but where this data was obtained is never stated. There are no reliable sheet music sales figures for this period, and nothing was reported in any publication of the day on a regular basis. *The Phonoscope* had a long column called "The Latest Popular Songs," but this was compiled from lists supplied by the publishers themselves--hardly an impartial source. This list was not ranked, and phonograph-specific material (the monologues, minstrel routines, descriptives and similar material that sold so well) was excluded. One suspects it was mostly a "plug list." ASCAP and other lists of top period songs" is given as another source for the "charts" of the 1890s. ASCAP was not founded until 1914 and has never published any sales data or rankings from this period. Whitburn subsequently has said he used ASCAP's "Hit Songs" brochures published half a century later, which give generalized lists of "big hits" of the 1890s. ASCAP's choices, of course, are totally undocumented. Recent research suggests that they were based more on Tin Pan Alley legend and lore than on anything concrete. Here are a couple of notable examples of songs that found their way into ASCAP's "old favorites" brochures, thence into many books and finally on to Whitburn's statistical charts. "After the Ball" (1892) is shown in *Pop Memories* as one of the biggest hits of the decade. The author, Charles K. Harris, spent the remainder of his long life loudly proclaiming what an enormous seller his song had been, and how with it he had virtually invented Tin Pan Alley. Even his autobiography is titled *After the Ball*. Eventually others began to repeat his colorful stories. But (1) examination of contemporary references in musical and theater journals indicate that while the song was indeed popular in late 1892 and early 1893, it quickly faded and was equaled or exceeded by scores of later, less-remembered tunes; and (2) it had virtually no impact via recordings. Another title that seems to have benefited from subsequent legend-building is "Daisy Bell" ("On a Bicycle Built For Two"). There is little contemporary evidence that it was anything more than one of many passing popular tunes. Clinging to "legend and lore," Whitburn imagines specific recorded versions of both these songs as "number one on the charts" for months on end, and places both among the top ten best selling records of the entire decade. He has since said that the songs must have been huge hits because they are mentioned in latter-day books. This is exactly how false information spreads. An author should look to original sources, not secondary ones, to find out what actually happened. Conversely, it should be noted, contemporary evidence suggests that "Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-Der-E" was a much bigger seller than either of the forgoing titles, at least on record. While it is listed in *Pop Memories*, it does *not* place as high as the forgoing--apparently because its author did not tell colorful stories about it, and it therefore receives less space in modern anecdotal histories. Recent questions raised about Whitburn's 1890s "charts" have resulted in the disclosure of a significant misrepresentation in the book. According to later statements by the author, what the book consistently calls best selling "records" of the 1890s actually reflects best selling *songs* (also of questionable validity, as we have seen) and the heading "weeks on chart" really means "months." Why? The author now says, "We had to translate the reality of the 1890s record industry into the context of the 20th century record industry. If, for example, we had listed (a record) as having been #1 for 50 weeks, it would so totally skew chart history as to make it incomprehensible in modern terms" (author's emphasis)⁵. In other words, people wouldn't understand what really happened, so it was changed to look more like today. This is an appalling way to approach historical research--especially when the author does not tell the reader he is doing so! The historian's job is to reconstruct what actually happened, not change it to look like last week's *Billboard* charts. More on sources. The articles by Jim Walsh are

given as “the single most important source for the (1900-1920s) charts.” Walsh is one of the legends of pioneer artist research, but he wrote biographical sketches, not technical articles about record sales. He mentions best sellers within the biographies, of course, but these are almost always anecdotal and hardly the sort of thing from which weekly (or is it monthly?) ranked charts could be constructed. When Walsh did give specific figures he was prone to the same mistakes as anyone else. He once repeated in print the old story that Vernon Dalhart’s Victor recording of “The Prisoner’s Song” had sold six to seven million copies. I asked Jim where he got that, and he replied rather sheepishly that he probably should not have said it; he knew little about “such things” and the figure, which came from a Victor promotional flyer printed in the 1940s, seemed highly improbable. In fact, figures compiled by Victor and reproduced in several modern sources indicate that the record’s sales were a fraction of this amount, probably about one million copies⁶. Whitburn, however, repeats the seven million figure as fact, and ranks the record right after “White Christmas” and “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” as the third-biggest seller in history. No sources are given. *Talking Machine World* (TMW) is cited as containing “monthly lists of nearly all popular record releases” starting in 1905. These lists had nothing to do with popularity. Then, the author says (page 7), “from 1914-21 the major record companies provided monthly lists of their best sellers to *Talking Machine World*.” I searched long and hard for these lists; after years of using *TMW* as a source I had never seen anything like that. Apparently, Whitburn was referring to a monthly top six for Chicago only, which appeared in the local news round-up for that city. Needless to say, this list was very limited in scope. *TMW* contained no national list and no references to sales in its editorial columns. Whitburn’s characterization of this source is misleading in the extreme. In fairness to the author, information on individual record sales did become more available in the 1920s--although there is still hardly enough to justify a weekly chart. (Whitburn has not said whether his heading “weeks” means weeks or months in the 1920s.) The introduction says “*Billboard* and *Variety* provided abundant information on the hit records and songs of the 1920s.” The author apparently relied on *occasional* mentions of sales in news columns. In 1929 *Variety* began printing a monthly ranking of best sellers by label, based on information supplied by the labels themselves. While subject to the biases of what each label wanted to see in print, no ranking of labels against each other, and the omission of all minor labels, this constitutes the best regularly published information to date on the sale of individual recordings. Additional rankings came and went during the early 1930s, with radio’s *Your Hit Parade* inaugurating the idea of a weekly national tune parade in 1935. All of these are subject to biases of one kind or another (it has never been revealed just how *Your Hit Parade*’s sponsor-controlled ranking was computed), but they do give a fairly good idea of month-by-month and even week-by-week song popularity in the 1930s. Translating this into individual record popularity requires some large leaps, but it can be done. From 1940 onward, Whitburn has been able to use *Billboard*’s national charts, which were inaugurated in that year. (These were previously indexed in his valuable book, *Top Pop Records, 1940-1955*.) One can argue about where *Billboard* got its information, but at least from this point forward the book is based on a clearly defined and presumably impartial primary source; the author did not have to “make up” the charts.

HOW ACCURATE ARE THE “MADE-UP” CHARTS?

Since Whitburn obviously didn’t get his early information where he said he did, on what were these charts based? They appear to be guesswork, reflecting modern biases

and a misunderstanding of how the record industry operated in its formative years. This is increasingly true the further back one goes. Thus, the representation of the 1890s is ludicrous, that of the 1920s merely erroneous in particular listings. Whether inadvertently or intentionally, the author, who is most familiar with the rock era, has forced earlier eras to conform to the chart patterns with which he is familiar, and has favored records and artists that appeal to collectors today. Cylinders of the 1890s are shown moving up and down the “charts” with alarming rapidity, much as rock records do today. The first one ranked number one is “Semper Fidelis” by the U.S. Marine Band for six weeks, followed by “Washington Post” for six and “The Thunderer” for four. None of these ever returned to the “charts” to sell more, because today rock records don’t do that. This is not how cylinders were distributed in those faraway days. Ample evidence suggests that a few best sellers sold steadily (mostly to coin-machine operators) for very long periods of time. The catalogs of Columbia and other companies bear this out, and even a few sales figures are available. In December 1892, the *Phonogram* reported that during the prior two years the “Pat Brady” monologues by Dan Kelly for the Ohio Phonograph Co. sold an amazing 5,000 cylinders. Whitburn garbles this as “Pat Kelly” and puts him on and off the charts in about two months in 1891. Several sources from 1895-1896 indicate that the two comic specialties of George W. Johnson, the first black recording artist, sold a phenomenal 25,000-30,000 copies during the first half of the decade, and were still major hits. Whitburn pushes Johnson’s two titles on and off the “charts” during the single year 1891. This is nonsense. Fagan and Moran’s invaluable *Encyclopedic Discography of Victor Recordings, (EDVR)* Vol. 1, shows the press runs of many early Victors from 1900-1903. Combining this information with the number of issued takes for each title (a predictable 500-1500 copies could be pressed from a single master then) one can derive a picture of what was selling. Of the six records with the largest press runs in EDVR only two appear on *Pop Memories’* “charts,” neither as a very big hit. The largest total I could find in EDVR was 10,124 copies of a song called “Truscalina Brown,” by Silas Leachman (6 takes). This is not listed at all in *PM*. The two titles by Leachman that are listed had press runs of about one-tenth that total. A certifiable best seller of this period is “The Holy City.” The book shows Harry Macdonough’s very familiar version reaching “no. 2 for one week” in late 1900, then disappearing. When this was pointed out, Whitburn dismissed that title as an “old time evergreen,” which probably sold “slowly but steadily for many months or even years.” He provides no basis for this statement, and Victor’s files paint a very different picture. Macdonough was called back repeatedly to record new takes of this number, in June 1900, November 1900 (twice), February 1902, June 1902, September 1902, January 1903, February 1903, April 1903, July 1903, November 1903, May 1904, June 1904, August 1906 and December 1908. In addition, during 1900-1903 alone Victor had *nine* of its other artists record and re-record the title. Does this sound like a “slow, steady seller”? Number two for one week? “The Holy City” was probably Victor’s number one best selling record for three or four years running. Production data is available from the Columbia files for the period after 1915. Of that label’s 14 top selling records from 1915-1920 only five turn up on Whitburn’s “charts,” three of them briefly and at lower chart positions. In other words, Whitburn got only two out of the 14 “right” (as hits), instead putting scores of lesser sellers at the top of his rankings. Incidentally, he has since claimed his charts to be “more than 90% accurate” for the period prior to 1930⁷. The above sample suggests that 14% (two out of 14) might be closer to the truth. Similarly unreasonable listings are found for the 1920s. A recent scholarly article based part of

its analysis on *Pop Memories*' listing of the socially relevant title "The Farm Relief Song" as a top ten hit in 1929⁸. Columbia's files show that this record shipped about one-sixth the total of first-line pop releases that fall. Twenty-three different pop tunes released by the label in the same month outsold it (although only four appear on *Pop Memories*' "charts"). Collectible artists frequent Whitburn's best sellers chart during the 1920s: Mamie Smith on the poorly distributed Okeh label (eight top hits), Fletcher Henderson's jazz orchestra (nine), Fiddlin' John Carson (six), Red Nichols (six), Louis Armstrong's Okeh electrics (eleven), King Oliver (five), even Bix Beiderbecke (two hits, including the super-rare "In a Mist"). The bizarre omissions and inclusions follow a certain pattern, which gives us a clue as to what went wrong with these charts. Columbia's top sellers during 1915 and 1916 were almost all Hawaiian numbers. These are not considered very interesting or collectible today, and they are severely underrepresented in *Pop Memories*. On the other hand, Al Jolson is very collectible, and four of his relatively rare Victors from 1912-1913 are shown on the charts, three reaching number one. Classical artists also are favored. Victor's Geraldine Farrar is shown with ten chart-toppers between 1907 and 1916, and Columbia's Louis Graveure with three (all top ten hits) in the late teens. These prestigious artists were promoted heavily by their labels, but this does not mean their discs outsold popular and dance numbers. The Columbia files indicate that most of Graveure's releases sold no more than 3,000 to 4,000 copies; at the same time (1916-1920) Louise and Ferrera's "Drowsy Waters" shipped 322,000 copies, but Whitburn does not list it at all on his charts. Many more examples of this pattern could be cited--interesting, collectible records are given high chart positions, uninteresting titles are downplayed. The use of anecdotal sources also is evident. For example, Art Landry's 1923 Gennett recording of "Dreamy Melody" is shown as reaching number one. Landry long regaled listeners with tall tales about how his first recording sold "one and a half million copies," which was probably more than the entire annual production of the tiny Gennett label. The claim was repeated by irresponsible authors and finally turns up here, "at the top of the charts"! Try to find a copy of this "hit" today.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Is it possible to compile a reasonably accurate book on record popularity during the first 50 years of the recording industry? I believe it is--but it would not look like *Pop Memories*. There is simply not enough data to support such precise rankings, and to suggest otherwise is misleading. One possible approach might be to compile alphabetical lists of the most popular records by year from, say, 1890-1910, then by month thereafter (perhaps with records grouped by general popularity level in later years). Not until the 1930s would ranked weekly charts seem justified. This is not as neat or seemingly precise as the *Pop Memories* approach, but it is truer to the actual source data. It is, in a sense, how the published charts themselves evolved. As for sources, primary reliance could be placed on three major indicators. Most important is internal company pressing, shipment and sales data, where it exists (for example, Victor and Columbia.) Whitburn apparently was not aware of this information. Second, a census of which records show up most frequently today in large, general collections would provide valuable information. If you find ten copies of "The Holy City" by the Haydn Quartet on Victor with a 1905 take and label type for every one of Billy Murray's "Give My Regards to Broadway" on Columbia, it is safe to assume that the former outsold the latter in that year. (Whitburn shows the opposite ratio for these two titles; I am not sure

which is right.) Such a census, done correctly, would prove time-consuming and difficult, but not impossible, and would represent a real breakthrough in knowledge. Third, for the 1890-1920 period one could index company catalogs to see which selections were listed in catalog after catalog, appeared in multiple versions, were included in medleys or mentioned in parodies, and so forth--all indicators of popularity. Conversely, one would see which titles quickly were deleted. Such data would be especially valuable in the pre-1920 era, when long-term sales were characteristic of the "hits." Also, a compiler should look at many of the sources *Pop Memories* consulted, particularly items in the contemporary press which offered specific information--always being wary, of course, of the reliability of the source and the dangers of fragmentary information. There is a good deal more data available than is sometimes supposed, even though it is not of the precision Whitburn indicates.

DOES THIS BOOK HAVE ANY VALUE?

If *Pop Memories* contains so many misleading claims and demonstrable errors, and is so hopelessly skewed toward the "rock perspective" of recording history, is it of any value at all? Yes. If you strip away all the nonsense about chart positions and "number one with a bullet," it is worthwhile as a selective listing of some of the generally more popular recordings and artists of the 78 rpm era. Any book that gives us six pages of Billy Murray records, year by year, with labels and record numbers and a short biographical sketch making clear his importance in the recording world, cannot be all bad. In fact, most of the important artists are here, including many who are seldom recognized elsewhere. A top-artists-of-all-time ranking, based on number and magnitude of chart hits, is speculative and ought to be labeled as such, but it is not entirely unreasonable. It's simply Whitburn's opinion. There is hope for the future. The author, who does care about the accuracy of his work and seems surprised by the criticism of this project, has agreed to investigate the first two data sources mentioned above. Further, he has said that a second edition of *Pop Memories* might be structured somewhat differently⁹. Mr. Whitburn is capable of better work than this; we might hope that he will think through and research more carefully a second edition. The reason that the present edition is a "dangerous book" is that its apparently precise data, with its impressive-looking sources, will be reprinted and enshrined elsewhere as historical fact. False data spreads this way, and the active suppression of alternative views about the book by friendly publications such as *Goldmine* doesn't help¹⁰. *Pop Memories* is being aggressively advertised and sold, and is in many libraries. Due to the author's good reputation for his previous indexes, many will take this very different volume to be equally accurate. It isn't. Buyer, and researcher--beware. *Reviewed by Tim Brooks.*

NOTES

¹ Hasse, John Edward, "Hoagy Carmichael as Recording Artist," speech delivered May 29, 1987 at the 21st Annual Conference of ARSC in Washington, D.C. The talk was accompanied by a handout listing Carmichael's "chart" records with peak position, weeks charted, etc.

² Mooney, Hughson, "Years of Strain and Stress: 1917-1929 In the Whitburn Record Charts," *Popular Music & Society* Vol. 12, No. 2 (Summer 1988), p. 9. Mooney's reference was to "The Farm Relief Song," which will be discussed later in this paper.

³ See for example *DISCOVERIES*, Sept. 1989, p. 9 and Oct. 1989, p. 13.

⁴ Brooks, Tim, "Joel Whitburn's *Pop Memories, 1890-1954*" (review), *Antique Phonograph Monthly* Vol. 8, No. 6 (1987), p. 11.

- ⁵ Whitburn, Joel, November 6, 1987 letter to *Antique Phonograph Monthly*, edited version published in *APM* Vol. 8, No. 7 (1988). This explanation by the author doesn't jibe with what appears in the book, incidentally. The total number of "weeks" shown for all records at no. 1 each year during the 1890s adds to approximately 52, not 12.
- ⁶ See for example, Fagan, Ted, and William R. Moran, *The Encyclopedic Discography of Victor Recordings* (Pre-Matrix Series) (Greenwood Press, 1983), p. lxii. Five Victor versions of the song are shown as having a collective press run of 1,320,356 copies between 1924 and 1927, the height of the song's popularity.
- ⁷ Whitburn, November 6, 1987 letter.
- ⁸ Mooney, *op. cit.*
- ⁹ Whitburn, Joel, December 22, 1987 letter to this writer, and subsequent correspondence. I have offered to assist him in locating additional data sources.
- ¹⁰ *Goldmine* published a cursory, glowing review of *Pop Memories* in December 1986, and has since refused to print any alternative views. 🗑️