

DISCOVERIES

["Discoveries" is a forum in which to publish findings that pertain to the concerns of ARSC but do not require treatment in a full-scale article. Pieces may be as short as one paragraph but no longer than three double-spaced typed pages.]

The Origin of the Word Discography

The term 'discography' originated in the 1930s to describe a catalogue of sound recordings....The earliest published use of the word...appears to be in the Melody Maker in December 1935. However, it may well be that the term was in use verbally before it appeared in print.

—Lewis Foreman, Systematic Discography (1974)

In trying to reconstruct the thinking of my half-century-younger alter ego, the most nagging puzzle about the making of my Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia of 1936 is why neither I nor, apparently, anyone else at the time described it specifically as a discography. It was some years later that I was generously credited with having "laid down" in my work "the principles and procedures of discography" (Clough and Cuming, The World's Encyclopaedia of Recorded Music, 1952, Introduction) and as "the true founder of classical discography as now practised." (Clough reviewing Foreman's study in The Gramophone, December 1974).

Just compiling the most extensive-yet catalogue raisonné was all I thought I was doing!

Yet I'd already known the term for some years, using it myself in "A Haydn Discography" appended to my 200th Anniversary Haydn article in the Phonograph Monthly Review for March 1932 (the valedictory issue of that pioneering American journal before the Great Depression terminated it). Earlier still, as editor of the PMR, I'd published in the January 1931 issue William H. Seltsam's "authorized article" on Geraldine Farrar that included a full-page "Farrar Discography." And while my Haydn example had been confined to naming compositions, performers, and record labels only, Seltsam's provided also record numbers and recording dates—for the Berlin 1906 G & Ts as well as the extensive Victor listings. As best I can remember now, it was the author, not editor, who supplied the caption.

For many years, long after the term had come into general use, I had thought that it didn't appear at all in my 1936 Encyclopedia. It was only very recently, during a reexamination of both the book itself and a batch of clipped reviews I've miraculously been able to hang onto (some 18 each from America and overseas out of a good many more examples), that I found I had indeed used the term, if only in passing, and

that one (just one, I think) reviewer had not only spotted it but credited me--erroneously, of course--with its coinage.

Well along (p. vii) in my prefatory explanations of the work's nature, I wrote that it carried the arrangement-by-composers principle a "step beyond" to the "presentation of each composer's discography work by work." But it was only Edward Betts, in the British newspaper (?) The Era for December 28, 1936, who picked that up for his review lead: "Not content with being a pioneer, R. D. Darrell has coined a new word to describe his work."

I wish I had! But it's doubtful that any individual can be credited with inventing so obvious a parallel-adaptation of bibliography: it must have occurred spontaneously and near-simultaneously to more than one record commentator. My own extremely vague impression is that I first saw it as discographie in some French record journal, probably Disques, evidently sometime before late in 1930 when I received Seltsam's Farrar example.

R. D. Darrell

It's pleasant to find that R.D. Darrell was not only the author of the earliest comprehensive classical discography but may also have been present when the word itself entered the English language. The following lexical comment is added at his suggestion.

The sources and dates Mr. Darrell gives will be news even to those who know the authoritative work on such matters, the Oxford English Dictionary--or, rather, the Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary, which includes this entry:

discography (disko-grafi). [f. *DISC sb. 2 d + -OGRAPHY. Cf. Fr. discographie.] A catalogue raisonné of gramophone records; a list of the recordings of a single composer or performer; also, the study of recordings. Hence **discograph-ical** a., pertaining or relating to discography; **disco-grapher**, one skilled in discography.

1935 Melody Maker 14 Dec. 8/3 I have seen all kinds of discology, discography, and long lists of records. 1936 R. D. Darrell Gramophone Shop Encycl. Recorded Music p. vii A presentation of each composer's discography work by work, with complete recorded versions of each composition in its original form. 1941 Jazz Information Nov. 22/1 Important as these items are to discographers, they were merely sidelines with James P. 1946 Jazz Mag. III. 1. 3/2 Eric S. Tonks' new complete Jazz discography is to be released in sections. Ibid. 12/1 It seems..obvious..without even hearing the records but just glancing through the discographical details, that these records hardly