NOTES ON MUSIC INDEXING

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"To index a folk-song is only a little less impossible than to index a cluster of daisies". (M. Dean-Smith. An index of English folk-songs, 1951).

The following observations derive from our immediate past experience in the B.B.C. Music Library of catalogue-revision and the internal “publication” of our Orchestral, Choral, Song, etc., Composer-catalogues and their supporting Title-Indexes. These contain upwards of 40,000 entries each. The work has been executed by a specially-recruited team consisting of Editor and four sub-editors (cataloguer-typists).

In 1955 a new set of Catalogue Rules was agreed upon for Composer entries. The subsequent title-indexing naturally reflects to a great extent the primary decisions then arrived at. Subject-indexing of music, in the context of general broadcast programmes at least, has been found to be irrelevant or unrewarding, and has therefore been left severely alone, except for certain groupings in the Orchestral Title Index (see below).

If music differs at all, from the cataloguer’s or indexer’s viewpoint, from other specialist literatures, this springs from its infinite adaptability (arrangements and modifications to suit various orchestral, solo or choral media), its international character (inter-relationship of translations and of titles and texts and versions of a common source), and the fairly large proportion of traditional, national and folk tunes which occur in so many disguises as to need special treatment.

Alphabetisation. Although our sister-library, the B.B.C. Gramophone Library, which is completely on cards, has abandoned word-by-word for letter-by-letter, the Music Library remained faithful to the former, which is, on balance, unbeatable for page-catalogues. In applying the British Standards Institution’s “Alphabetical arrangement” rules, our plan was to be strictly pragmatic. Thus we eschewed their rule about elided letters and apostrophes. Let’s, Li’l, It’s and T’was, etc. were accordingly separated from their sedater, complete forms because they are only singable (and therefore recallable) as actually set to the life of the words. You can’t sing “It is a long way to Tipperary”, so you won’t look for it under that form, and there seemed to be no virtue in bringing together elisions and spelled-out forms.

Spellings (Straight or bent). Mis-spellings were taken at their face-value, with cross-references where these seemed absolutely necessary. Dialect spellings were treated on their merits. A single tune might masquerade under a catch-word such as Owd, Ould, Ole in various editions, and these could only be brought together as entries under Old. But no-one would look there for Auld lang syne or Auld Robin Gray, or under Call for Ca’ the yowes, nor under With for Wi’ a hundred pipers.

*Based on a paper read to the Society in December, 1960.
FOREIGN LANGUAGES. Practice generally has been to make the original title the focal point, with all references thereto. Grieg and Liszt would, however, look strange under this plan, and the best known or conventional English title has often been preferred. Grieg emerges in English: “I love thee” is the obvious finding place for this song, with a first reference “Ich liebe dich” and an “also-ran” reference from the original text “Jeg elsker dig”. Similarly, “Last Spring” is the best place for the song “Varen” with a reference from the latter. Liszt, however, fares differently: in the Song catalogues we use the original language of the song text as our main heading, but in the Orchestral catalogues we follow Grove in using the language of the first printed edition. But when Shakespeare and Goethe find their musical way back into English or German settings via Russian or Italian, the simple and natural solution is to ignore everything except the title “as found” (to use an auctioneer’s term).

In short, extreme flexibility and an emphasis on the most likely-to-be-sought-for heading have been our guiding principles. This has resulted in some apparent contradictions as between Orchestral, Songs and Choral Catalogues, but the plan has largely justified itself by ease of reference. In so far as the sectional catalogues are often dealing with the same music in varying settings, there is some advantage in getting the best of all worlds by the variations outlined above.

SONG-TITLES. Publishers will grasp at any straw to catch a buyer. There are at least fourteen settings of Goethe’s Kennst du das Land and seven different versions of the title in German alone. Occasionally an original title is lost sight of completely. Tchaikowsky’s None but the weary heart is Mignon’s song over again, but Englished out of the Russian via the German. Ophelia’s song How should I your true love know has six title-or-first-line published versions, and the prevalence of the invented titles such as Pretty ring time for It was a lover and his lass adds further to the confusion. In the folk-song field variants proliferate still more merrily (quite apart from linguistic oddities). There are more than twenty differing titles for the song usually known as The Outlandish Knight (Lady Isabel; The Elf Knight, etc.); and, beside these peculiarities, an identical title may vary musically from county to county.

SUBJECT INDEXING. Since our Orchestral and Song Title catalogues contain some 20% of common entries, and since the latter is strictly alphabetical, it seemed wise to go a step further, for Orchestral Titles, and attempt a measure of subject-grouping. Wherever the relevant key-words appear in the title, therefore, such words as coronation, royal, Christmas, carnival, fairy, London, France-Französisch, night-Nacht-nuit-nocturne, etc., are used as alphabetising-factors, thus forming sizeable headings. To attempt to bring all Christmassy music together, whatever its title, was impracticable (what makes music Christmassy, anyway?), but at least much music actually calling itself “Christmas, Noel, Yuletide etc.” is now gathered together for the first time. The extra labour thus expended on Orchestral titles can also be capitalised for the Choral and Song repertories where they overlap, and these latter catalogues in their turn, close the gaps made by abandoning strict alphabetical order in the former.
CONCLUSION. What, finally, makes a good specialist index? The readiness, surely, to bend the rules of scientific indexing to suit the peculiarities of the special topic in hand. This is what my staff have exerted themselves so vigorously to do, and I think they have been remarkably successful. If there are any real weaknesses, our broadcasters (not by nature given to reticence) will be quick to point them out.

NEW MEMBERS

Darycott, Miss Edith M., M.A., of Ealing, W.5.
Doyle, Miss Antonia, of Paris. (Corresponding member for France.)
Hogben, Mrs. C. E., of Pinner, Middlesex.
Lacey, A. D., of Clapham Common, S.W.4.
McDougall, Mrs. P.M., B.Sc, of Henley-on-Thames, Oxon.

As we go to press we learn with great regret of the death of William John Bishop, F.L.A., a Founder Member. An obituary notice will appear in the next issue.

RATHER UNCOMMON FOR THE TIMES

"A more marked example of carelessness or ignorance... in index to The Times. Two women were committed to prison, one, Amelia House, for firing a pistol at a man... the other, Jane Williams, for stealing a mare.... This occurrence is entered in the index under the letter 'R' as 'Rather uncommon for females'. The chance of anyone looking under 'Rather' for an occurrence of this kind must be infinitesimal."

Letter from Corrie Leonard Thompson to Notes and Queries, 7th Ser., 10, 1890, pp.344-345.

(Contributed by Mrs. E. M. Hatt.)