

FROM THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Respect for the Record : The Legitimacy of Reference Research

-An invited paper presented May 9, 1990, by Bryan N.S. Gooch
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The title of this paper was suggested by reflection on a task which has been a necessary corollary of my years in the field of musical-literary bibliography. Let me offer an anecdote by way of background. Some years ago, when I was involved in the preparation of Musical Settings of Late Victorian and Modern British Literature: A Catalogue, a member of my own department posed the question: "Are you still working on your - ah - compilation?" The tone -- and the implication -- were clear. Some of my other colleagues seemed just as determined in their inability to understand the nature or the importance of bibliographic research.

The point is simply this: in many quarters such research is viewed, at worst, as unimportant (if not undignified) and, at best, as pedestrian and boring. Such a perception is based on the notion that criticism is the alpha and omega of scholarly endeavour and that pure research on the corpus is less valuable and exciting. The flaw in this attitude is, let me suggest, both fundamental and obvious -- and let me add that, of course, not all scholars (many of them critics) fall victim to it. Yet the currency of the attitude is such that it must be addressed. The argument which exalts criticism and debases serious bibliography fails simply because without a clear, accurate, and detailed view of the corpus, critical work can be at risk because it cannot range freely over the totality of relevant material; further, incomplete consideration may also lead, on occasion, to uninformed and inaccurate judgments. The more reference tools of high quality which can be placed in the hands of scholars, the better. Under no circumstances do I argue against criticism: rather my case is based on

the assumption that one gets nearer to the truth if one can see the world-- or whatever part of it is relevant to one's study -- whole, and that dedicated reference research is therefore not only legitimate but absolutely necessary. Moreover, good bibliographic work is frequently hard work; it is no mere mechanical process but, given the state of many extant records, requires both skill and scholarly acuity. Pieces of the picture are frequently not easy or are impossible to obtain, and this is one field in which the approach of a thoroughly determined sleuth is not misplaced, especially when it comes to sorting out a myriad of original sources, attempting to determine where missing fragments of the picture might lie, recognizing derivations, unidentified arrangements, misattributions, and so on. Certainly, some of the work requires a willingness to engage in a kind of routine recording, like the laying down of countless railway ties, but even here any section foreman will explain in vivid language the consequence of failing to put the ties down properly. But there is always the excitement of forging into new country, of seeing the route develop, and of solving the engineering problems along the way. Not every day brings such problems, let alone solutions to them, but what task ever does? Ask the research scientist who works day by day in his laboratory. But without the pure science -- without the tough-minded solid scholarship which is able to show what is known, what might be known with further work, and what must remain, at least for the present, unknown for lack of evidence -- the applied work, whether applied science, or in my own field, critical musicology or literary study, will find progress less easy, at best.

The criticism of reference research comes, then, from a failure to understand its nature and utility, from a lack of awareness of its inherent excitement and intellectual empiricism. And it is also generated in part, I suggest, by a pervasive and lurking human tendency, not voluntarily admissible, that one mode of endeavour is qualitatively better--more important, more respectable--than another, a kind of arrogance that, while perhaps fun to indulge in for the nonce, is ultimately counterproductive and, ironically, self-defeating. Let me return to the earlier analogy--if the object is to run trains, the trackwork and the equipment need to be in place and in reliable operating condition.

Now, I have pointed to the necessity for the researcher to continue to determine what is known with certainty, what can be known with further effort, and what has to remain unknown for the moment although, in all cases, subject for speculation as long as speculation is clearly distinguished from fact and from probability. And it is to the last of these areas--the unknown--to which I want to turn in the last part of this paper.

What the music bibliographer discovers more frequently than ought to be the case is that in many instances the record--the body of established fact based on printed and manuscript scores, letters, diaries, performance details derived from programs, reviews, concert-hall and theatre records, and so on--is incomplete by virtue of destruction (war, fire, and flood have taken their toll, but so has human carelessness), mysterious disappearance, simple neglect, or the failure to realize that posterity might have some interest in--let alone use for--such material. Why is it, indeed, that criminal records, over the centuries, are often better documented than cultural ones? And while the situation might seem to obtain in inverse proportion to the importance of

the composer, that generalization is imperfect--witness the loss of Walton's manuscripts of his music for the Olivier Henry V, thrown out, according to William Alwyn, during a rather thorough house-cleaning of Pinewood Studios.

Indeed, the whole matter of incidental music poses a galaxy of such problems. As I have noted elsewhere, theatres have traditionally not had the money to hire archivists nor the space to store music, and scores written for particular productions have frequently disappeared, and are still being lost even in the present day. To be fair, not all of this music is really significant in purely musical terms, but it is vital if one is to try to establish a sense, for instance, of the whole production, of the musical response to scenes and characters and the effect of the music on the presentation of a dramatic text. What results is a hole in the cultural fabric--a kind of cultural tooth decay which occurs simply because of lack of preventive maintenance. "Incidental" has come to mean "ephemeral" and "unimportant" in many instances--again, through a failure to realize the importance of each part of the artistic output. Nor have scores and other materials always been passed to libraries and other repositories for safekeeping, and, even when they have, they have sometimes fallen victim to the subjective judgment of an era (and not been properly catalogued, for example) or to the exigencies of space and budget (which are always keyed to sets of priorities and hence to preservation policies which range from the carefully directed to the apparently whimsical).

That this kind of problem should be eradicated is clear, and it is here that music librarians can be of enormous help. Retrospective collection and cataloguing of manuscript material, however minor, particularly within the local area served by a library will fill some gaps, to be sure. And librarians should assiduously seek such items whose

existence they suspect, as well as tap every box in every basement, attic, or between-stairs cupboard they can lay their hands on. But current material--music for local productions, manuscripts of songs (however minor)--should be given a home and the catalogues continually updated and made available on a national and hence international level. Modern technology, which offers a quantum leap in the area of data collection and surveillance, removes much of the difficulty and, thus, excuse for failing to preserve the bits and pieces and to share the details of such material as can be located. In a sense, then, my plea is for the adoption of a much more determined mission than has hitherto been accepted in many areas, for it is necessary not to believe that the material will come in the door in some magical way but, rather, to be convinced that in most cases it will not and that it is necessary to go out to composers, theatre directors, et al, and seek it for preservation--in the public interest.

That interest will only be fully served -- the goal of active conservation realized -- with a good deal of energy and initiative. And it follows, as you will all readily admit, that in conjunction with that effort there will have to be, in the case of many music libraries, more attention to future space requirements and backup technical services. Many institutions already face cramped quarters and cataloguing backlogs: those situations must be reversed even in the light of present acquisition policies, let alone serious aggressive moves along the lines I am suggesting. Capital and operating budgets will have to increase above present levels even to keep pace with

current printed output, and fiscal and physical planning which regularly takes a long look down the road is an absolute necessity. The library, after all, is to the humanist -- for example the musicologist or literary scholar -- and to some social scientists, what the laboratory is to the researcher in what are popularly known as the hard sciences. And as we would not dream of letting our laboratories go without the latest equipment, so we neglect libraries, which are the repositories of our cultural heritage, at our peril. This plea, further, is not made with the hope that librarians will engage in the campaign for better funding or for more sweeping collections policies on their own; indeed, they should engage the active support of the parts of the academy -- especially the academic users -- which it is their mandate to serve and of which they are quite properly a part.

Librarians have a vital role to play, it is clear, in ensuring that there is a real respect for the record, a respect which goes beyond assistance which they render, given existing resources, when new reference works are in preparation. By enthusiastic garnering and preservation, by going out to collect -- in boxes or shopping bags, if necessary -- what otherwise will almost certainly be forgotten, if not lost, they will leave a splendid legacy to the bibliographers and documenters of future generations, the legitimacy of whose work is clear. And they can find pleasure in that and in the notion that they have taken every step necessary in their power and capacity in a type of research endeavour which is vital, challenging, and exciting.

