

Too many records

This year sees the fiftieth anniversary of a series of recording sessions which were at the time a minor landmark in the history of music and subsequently proved to be of personal significance to me. In June and October 1957 the distinguished scholar and performer Thurston Dart (1921-71) visited four historic organs to record for EMI a selection of music by 12 composers from William Byrd to John Stanley. These recordings were released the following year on an EP (Purcell and Handel only) and an LP, whose sleeve note claimed that it was the first time that a survey of two centuries of English organ music had been recorded on instruments contemporary with the composers. Would anyone today take such pains to secure 65 minutes of recorded sound?

I bought these two records as a schoolboy in the early 1960s. By the late 1980s my copies were well worn and I therefore lived in hope that these long-deleted gems would ultimately be resurrected on CD. In January 1994 I approached EMI to advocate their reissue. At that time, none of Dart's legacy was available and these recordings seemed a particularly strong candidate. Although in mono, the sound quality was excellent; the instruments were as close to authenticity as conditions at the time permitted; and the music was attractive. EMI was sympathetic to my proposal but it did not wish to undertake the project. It agreed, however, to sell me copies of the master tapes and to license me to make a CD. What was I to do?

I had no experience of the recording industry or its retail trade. Seven years earlier, by reprinting a rare book on the Scottish philosopher David Hume, I had established myself as a minor publisher. Should I now become a minor record label also? At the time we had just moved house (a very wearing experience), but I felt an obligation to the memory of Thurston Dart and a duty to put my money where my mouth was. Moreover, tentative enquiries about costs convinced me of the project's viability and encouraged me to take the plunge. Priory's recording engineer, Paul Crichton, agreed to remaster the analogue tapes for me. The original record sleeves had included no pictures of the organs. I obtained photographs of all four – three of them in colour. I also had permission to use a contemporary photograph of Dart. All this pictorial material, along with a new note about the performer and histories of the instruments, would surely make an informative CD booklet.

The new disc was released in July 1994 as JMSCD 1. It had already received publicity and I had a pile of advance orders. Moreover, reviewers were unanimously warm in their



J. Martin Stafford, the owner of Ismeron, is pictured with Ismeron

praise. Persuading retailers to stock my product was not a problem. Thirteen years ago, there were more independent record shops than there are now. Their proprietors were people who respected my enterprising spirit and were willing to deal with a label whose 'catalogue' was only one CD. I subsequently also appointed stockists in the USA and Japan.

Encouraged by my modest success, I contemplated another project. 1994 was the centenary of the birth of E. J. Moeran. His piano works had once been available on two Lyrita LPs, but there was no prospect of their being reissued or of a new version, which would nicely fill a CD. I approached Eric Parkin. He had a sound reputation as an interpreter of English piano music, so I knew that if he accepted my proposal, success would be assured. He did accept – and with great enthusiasm. I arranged sessions at Radley College, near Abingdon, late in October. All went perfectly to plan, except that we were unable to release the new disc until January 1995. It proved to be the only new recording commissioned to celebrate the Moeran centenary. A year later, at his suggestion, Eric also made for me a disc of music by Geoffrey Bush, who had introduced him to John Ireland in the 1940s and to whom he therefore felt a deep gratitude.

In September 1997 the British Clavichord Society, which knew of my Dart organ CD, urged me to reissue his clavichord recordings. It was confident that many of its members would want the discs and pledged its support. I was delighted to undertake this project. In 1963, I had written to Thurston Dart and received a prompt reply in which he described his two clavichord LPs (Bach's *French Suites* and pieces by J. J. Froberger – issued simultaneously on L'Oiseau Lyre in 1961) as 'two of the best discs I have ever

made'. In the Decca group archive there were other clavichord recordings of Purcell and five early English pieces, so I knew there would be sufficient material to make two CDs. Like EMI, Decca licensed me to reissue these recordings, which were launched at a BCS recital in July 1998.

Later that summer, I was introduced to Julian Rhodes. I knew of him through a CD he had made with the recorder player Piers Adams. For some time I had considered recording the complete harpsichord works of William Croft, two pieces of which were included in the Dart clavichord recordings. Most of Croft's harpsichord works (19 suites plus miscellaneous pieces) had never been recorded at all nor even existed in any reliable printed form until 1974, when Howard Ferguson and Christopher Hogwood prepared a new edition for Stainer and Bell. This was definitely a gap in the catalogue. Julian agreed to make the recording.

Adam Swainson (a member of the British Clavichord Society) offered to host the sessions in his West Devon home, and with the help of harpsichord maker David Law three suitable instruments (virginal, spinet and two-manual harpsichord) were transported to the venue. The sessions took place in April 1999 and the two well-filled discs were released in the summer. They constitute the largest recording project ever devoted to Croft. Julian had intended to sell them at his recitals; but within a few months he began to experience in his left elbow problems which blighted his career and brought his life to a premature end. By Christmas 2000, his arm had been amputated, but the cancer had spread to his lungs and he died in March 2001 at the early age of 36. (Thurston Dart also had died of cancer when he was only 49.) Despite being well received by most critics, the Croft CDs have never sold well and even after eight years I have not recovered the £6,000 it cost to make them.

Chastened by this experience and aware that the saturated music market is now more friendly to buyers than to sellers, I have subsequently embarked on only one further venture: a reissue in 2006 of recordings from the 1950s of chamber works and songs by Robert Still (reviewed on page 25 of the July/August 2006 issue). This was achieved on a shoe-string budget, so the risks of loss were minimal. Since there is still a demand for Thurston Dart, I recently produced a further 300 copies of English Organ Music, thereby ensuring that it will remain available for the foreseeable future, if not for another 50 years.

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