

AN ABIDING PASSION

John Steane pays tribute to *The Record Collector*, now in its 60th year and still true to the values with which it was founded.

Coming up for our 1000th issue, this is a good time to salute a contemporary. *The Record Collector* is a magazine for which the stock adjectives are 'little' and 'gallant', which are well enough as far as they go but patronising and inadequate. Begun in 1946 as a cyclostyled hobbies news-sheet, it developed quickly, becoming a source of archival material unique in its field. It is now into its 50th volume.

The 'little' is true in that until recently you could slip it into an average coat-pocket. Nowadays the pocket would have to be larger but the idea remains much the same. As for the 'gallant', that is an understatement: 'heroic' would be better. For all but 60 years it has been kept going by love and hard work. It has never made money and does not expect to do so. With a steady subscription list of just under 1000, it exists through the devotion of (at any one time) a handful of experts and enthusiasts to whom singing and singers' records have become an abiding passion. And, of course, it needs an editor.

The founder was one James Dennis, who ran the magazine until his death in 1983. He was a dearly loved, generous-minded humourist, with an amateur's zest which he channelled into the pursuit of scholarship. His starting-point was experience and, through it, a perceived need. The story of *The Record Collector* begins in London's Caledonian market. In the 1930s (Friday the best day) record collectors would arrive, ready to swoop when the stalls opened at 10 o'clock. There, for a shilling or so, you might pick up the long-deleted Gramophone & Typewriter issues of 1902 or (highly favoured year) 1904. Prizes would be gloated over. 'What did you get?' 'Oh, this Caruso, a couple of Melbas, nice condition, and a song sung by a chap called Ancona.'

It was probably mention of this same Ancona (Mario Ancona, 1860-1931) that set the young James Dennis thinking. Ancona, we have to realise, was the leading baritone of the so-called golden age of the 1890s: casts which were headed by (say) Melba and the De Reszke brothers would also include Ancona. He was important and good; his records also good and, even at that time, rare. James Dennis one morning overheard two collectors, the first of whom said 'There's Ancona's [*Pagliacci*] Prologue over there,' to which the other replied 'Not interested, I've got Basiola's'. Mario Basiola sang Tonio to Gigli's Canio in the 1934 recording of the opera: in earlier days he had been an impressive singer but by then he was hardly one for the connoisseur, and of course the record had no rarity value whatsoever. The listener reflected that the collector who wasn't interested in Ancona because he 'had' Basiola didn't know the relative worth of things, and that there was no public, coordinating source from which he could learn. Here were the records, and hardly anybody knew what existed and what they were

worth.

The war intervened and, like many other young collectors, James Dennis served abroad and incidentally found out much about old records. On his return, he ran off 100 copies of a collectors' 'bulletin', sold them for sixpence a copy and found that they 'took'.

That first issue contained (like the first issue of *The Gramophone*) an outline of proposed objectives: a kind of manifesto. Some way down in the list came what was soon to be established as the centre of *The Record Collector's* function and character - the discography. The first need was to know what existed. They began with lists of records, sketchy in detail and incomplete. Gradually the realisation came that the work involved extensive research, accurate checking and precise enquiry into apparent anomalies (the presence of different performances with the same catalogue number, for instance). On its own, a discography, however valuable, is still dry matter for the readership, and the form has been for it to follow a biography and critical discussion of the records themselves. Up to 1996 *The Record Collector* published studies, along these lines, of over 250 singers. That was the year of the first cumulative index, an updated and more detailed version of which is planned to appear with the completion of the 50th volume.

This is some achievement. And the 50 volumes constitute a resounding testimonial to the amateur. James Dennis ran a shop, and when he was interviewed on the Ipswich edition of the BBC's radio programme *Down your Way* it was for his work for the town's protection of wildlife. Larry Lustig has been the editor for the last 16 years. Contributions come from many parts of the world, usually from professional men; one of the most valued, William Moran, was a petroleum and mining geologist in California. These people may work on a singer for years, often travelling far, even learning foreign languages in order to meet people who (say) knew the singer in question or so as to read hard-gained material from newspapers or letters. There is no money at the end of it, and sometimes a real sacrifice to be made on the way: at a time when the magazine looked like going under, James Dennis sold his record collection to pay what was needed.

The current number divides its attention between Miriam Licette and Charles Panzéra, names familiar, I dare say, to many *Gramophone* readers but probably misty to some. Over the last 10 years or so a CD has been produced to help roll the mists away. These, of course, are all 'historic' singers (the magazine has gone as far as Di Stefano and Bastianini in recent years, but they still belong to the past). Time occludes even the brightest reputation. *The Record Collector*, in this sense, is Time's enemy. These fine singers of the past are no less singers of today if their recordings are kept as live experience. To do just that has been the business of this 'gallant, little' magazine. It now has 50 volumes, a growing CD catalogue and a website (www.therecordcollector.org) to its name, and its contribution is unequalled.

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