

REVIEWS

AFRICAN MUSIC ON L.P. AN ANNOTATED DISCOGRAPHY, *by* ALAN P. MERRIAM, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1970. pp. 200.

In publishing this work Alan Merriam has undertaken a labour of love for the music of this continent, made possible by grants from the Ford Foundation to the Committee of Fine Arts and the Humanities of the African Studies Association. The book contains details of three hundred and ninety L.P. and E.P. discs and classifies the information printed on the sleeves of each which in some cases is extensive and in others consists of the bare title only. In addition, Merriam and his assistants have listened to each item of the music and, in most cases, have given a brief description of the style of performance e.g. "Litanic repeated instrumental, iterative vocal, polyphony, duple metre" etc.

The main entries are listed under the name of the recording company or producing organisation arranged in alphabetical order. This occupies over half of the volume. The rest of the closely printed pages are devoted to no less than eighteen indexes which refer to almost every aspect of the recordings which can be deduced from the published information as well as from Merriam's own assessment of the stylistic characteristics of each recorded item. This alone must have taken hundreds, if not thousands, of working hours to complete.

It is indeed difficult to assess the ultimate value of this work without first making detailed use of the manifold cross references which the author has made available. There is bound to be disagreement among musicians over the need for two or three of the indexes which add little to the comprehension of the music itself or which contain insufficient description to be of more than casual interest.

The African names of the instruments, for example, might have been associated with the language concerned and the languages identified geographically or by countries. A map or two would have been most helpful in locating origins.

The printing of the mass of figures involved in the indexes would have been much clearer had the printers employed contrasting type faces, particularly a bold type face for the main references and the use of 'A' and 'B' in place of Roman figures 'I' and 'II' for the two sides of the disc. However, these are small matters. What is certain is that the publication demonstrates in a thoroughly practical manner what should be done in future for African music recordings which pretend to authenticity.

The limitations which beset the compilers of this discography are not theirs but those of the various recording agents whose knowledge of the subjects they presented on discs was often sketchy and circumscribed by the demands of profitability rather than of scientific and musical accuracy. In any case, standards of assessment of the relative virtues of individual items of African music are far from being established and up till now have been mostly those of spectators and foreign enthusiasts rather than of the African composers, singers and musicians . . . exoteric rather than esoteric.

The task of indexing so complex a subject is not made easier by the fact that no authoritative list of African languages and dialects is yet available, nor is there unanimity in the classification of the large number of musical instruments employed, let alone in the spelling of African names. Public interest outside Africa is often more concerned with attempting to trace the supposed influence of one style of music upon another rather than with a musicianly estimate of the artistic and social value of each item; a preoccupation with the shape of the wood without first recognising the nature of the trees.

Alan Merriam gives full credit to his many collaborators and especially to Gerald T. Johnson who acted as his research assistant.

In the appearance of this valuable addition to our knowledge of what has been recorded of the music of Africa up to 1965, the Ford Foundation has again shown how funds devoted to the oral arts can be wisely spent in the background, through scholarly work which must go hand in hand with today's scientific recording in the field, if African music is to receive the recognition and stimulus it requires to keep pace with the work of each new generation of African composers and musicians.

Professor Merriam remarks in his preface that he does not include the two hundred and ten L.P. recordings made by the present reviewer and published by the International Library of African Music in the 'Sound of Africa' series, because of the detailed information already made available from this source. It may be of interest to note that a similar discography, to be published in book form covering the 'Sound of Africa' series only, is at present in course of preparation which will be supplementary in several respects to the work under review.

HUGH TRACEY