

Season for record guide may have come, gone

By Ifan Payne

contributing reviewer

Recorded Classical Music: A Critical Guide to Compositions and Performances, by Arthur Cohn (2,184 pages; Schirmer Books; \$75)

In terms of bulk and price, Arthur Cohn's *Recorded Classical Music* is a sizable work. Mr. Cohn, a composer, conductor and critic who is the director of serious music for Carl Fischer Inc., has drawn on his large record collection in writing capsule reviews of more than 12,000 pieces by 1,000 composers.

The reviews are arranged by composer. Each section includes the composer's dates, and compositions are listed alphabetically within each genre. For each piece, Mr. Cohn discusses the recording he deems best. In some cases, the date of composition is given. The book has an index of record labels but not of performers.

At first glance, the scope of the book and wealth of detail would seem to make it ideal for every record collector who has stared with indecision at a rack full of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons." Before long, the reader begins to have doubts.

The major problem lies with

Mr. Cohn's decision, in most cases, to recommend only one recording of each work. As a result, the book was to an extent obsolete the moment it was printed. Although Mr. Cohn argues that the recordings he recommends "have already stood the tests of time and the marketplace," his choices too often do not meet those criteria.

Of his recommendations for the Beethoven symphonies, nine were issued in the 1970s and have hardly had an opportunity to stand the test of time.

"New sound techniques applied to recordings have neither supplanted the best of past performances nor have they provided better ones," Mr. Cohn writes.

How true. One can only wish Mr. Cohn had heeded his own words. His choices lean heavily on performances recorded in the 1960s and '70s, and the book gives the impression that the era was a golden age of classical recording.

Mr. Cohn seems so sure of himself when he writes, "There will be very few discs in the coming years that will surpass the artistry of the performances endorsed by this guide." That is a sad view of the future and an inaccurate view of the past.