Inventing the Recording

The following passage has been adapted from Eva Moreda Rodriguez's essay *Inventing the Recording*. It appears in *The Public Domain Review*.

1 Thomas Edison initially believed that the phonograph would be most in demand in offices and companies. Recorded sound, he thought, would make business communication easier by doing away with the ambiguities of written language. However, the Improved Phonograph and Perfected Phonograph, both of which he launched in 1888, took recording technologies in a different direction. Audiences turned out not to be interested in the phonograph because of its practical uses, but because it entertained them; the first phonograph parlor opened in San Francisco in 1889, and was soon followed by thousands of others all over the United States.

2 In Spain—more rural, less industrialized—phonographs were instead paraded around cities and towns and temporarily installed in civic centers, schools, hotels, and churches. For a modest fee, locals from all social classes were able to acquaint themselves with the latest discoveries of science. Some of the names and endeavors of these Spanish phonography pioneers have found their way to us today through advertisements and reports in local newspapers. Many of them were agents of Edison's or funfair impresarios, and we know of a cornet player and entertainer by the name of Lorenzo Colís who in the summer of 1894 toured a phonograph around the Basque Country and La Rioja, and visited the Ortuella area.

3 It was not the thrill of listening to internationally famous performers and speakers that drew audiences to these phonographic sessions. Accounts suggest that phonograph operators were most successful when they recorded local musicians and speakers in front of the audience and then immediately played back the impressed cylinder. It was this, the act of recognizing familiar voices, that ultimately astonished audiences and persuaded them that the phonograph could reproduce reality as it was.

4 And yet, if we were to listen to some of the surviving examples from this era, we would probably find it hard to believe that anyone could have mistaken what is in them with live sound, even accounting for deterioration of the cylinder. While it is true that some such claims simply echoed Edison's publicity (or transcribed it to the letter), one can imagine that an unfamiliar audience, shocked by the experience of hearing recorded sound for the first time, would be willing to forgive shrillness, blurriness, and lack of definition, and accept what they heard as an accurate representation of reality. Moreover, most audiences would not be particularly interested in hearing a particular recording again and again after they had established that it was, indeed, true to reality. In any case, most would not have been able to do so unless a phonograph was in residence in their town; phonographs were expensive and difficult to manipulate at the time, hardly appropriate as a home appliance. Although some recordings from that era have survived to the present day, most were intended to be as temporary as the sound they recorded: played back in phonographic sessions but seldom treasured in households or collections.

5 The phonograph became a domestic appliance with the successive launches of the Spring Motor Phonograph, the Edison Home Phonograph, and the Edison Standard Phonograph between 1896 and 1898. With this came the need for a constant supply of professionally produced, well-crafted recordings that could lure upper- and middle-class phonograph owners back to the shops again and again. The recording as a commodity was born—but it still had to be embedded with values and meanings potential buyers could relate to; values and meanings that resonated with ideas they might have had about themselves, but also that connected them to the powerful narrative of the global revolution brought over by recording technologies. In Constantino's native Spain, the task was undertaken by some forty *gabinetes fonográficos* (phonography studios) scattered across the country—a Spanish phenomenon in some respects, relatively independent of Edison's commercial enterprises in more industrially developed countries. The *gabinetes* sold phonographs imported from the United States, but the wax cylinders were recorded and produced by the *gabinetes* themselves.

6 The *gabinetes* not only produced the first recordings to be made in Spain, they also produced the first Spanish recordings—that is, recordings shaped by the culture they were part of. This is immediately obvious in the choice of repertoire. Theatrical culture thrived in turn-of-the-century Spanish cities. The upper and established middle classes flocked to opera houses; the working and lower middle classes, to *zarzuela* theatres and *café cantantes* where *flamenco* was performed—although the latter two still managed to attract a few members of the wealthier social classes who longed for authenticity. Soon, opera, *zarzuela*, and *flamenco* were filling the *gabinetes'* catalogues.

Breakdown of Thomas Edison's Invention Patents

Patent	Total Percentage
Batteries	13%
Electric	39%
Mining	5%
Others	8%
Phonograph	18%
Telephony	17%