A Voice without a Face: Popular Music and the Phonograph in the 1890s

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A voice without a face: popular music and the phonograph in the 1890s

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While the rock'n'roll era, dance bands, country and the blues have been the subject of detailed and analytical histories, the 1890s, those formative years of music-recording, still await adequate and rigorous scrutiny. The standard (and only) history of the recording process remains Roland Gelatt's *The Fabulous Phonograph*, whose first edition appeared in 1955. But while Gelatt's foreword promisingly notes that 'the history of the phonograph is at once the history of an invention, an industry and a musical instrument', his book seldom rises above a journalistic narrative. It is also marred by an ill-concealed bias towards the classical repertoire and against popular musics.

A substantial scholarly return to the last part of the nineteenth century when the outlines of today's record industry took shape is overdue. And among contemporary sociological/culturalist authors, there is something of a consensus that the approach to the history of communications technologies put forward by Raymond Williams as the best place to begin (Williams 1974). Richard Middleton has recently given an admirable summary of the early years of sound recording in Williamsite terms:

> The 'phonograph' and 'gramophone' were at first seen as potentially useful more for commercial activities (office dictation), and pedagogical and archive purposes, than for the reproduction of music. But they also fitted into a nineteenth-century history of the development of instruments for mechanical reproduction: musical boxes, barrel pianos and organs, orchestrions, pianolas; and once the embryonic businesses saw the possibilities of mass dissemination, the necessary mass production technology, cheap playback equipment, and a global distribution network were developed with remarkable speed. (Middleton 1990, p. 84)

The 1890s was the decade in which the phonograph industry began its transformation into the recorded music business, though Middleton's 'remarkable speed' came later. Through Edison and others the technology of sound-recording had been developed in the late 1870s. But it was only in the 1890s that the pre-history of sound-recording gave way to the first phase of recorded music.

Although the end of the 1880s had seen the distribution of items such a recitation of the Lord's Prayer (released in Britain by Emil Berliner's company), the 1890s saw the rapid growth of music recordings on cylinder and disc.

The decade began with the Columbia Phonograph Co of Washington DC initiating commercial recording in the USA. Most of its sales of pre-recorded cylinders were to coin-in-the-slot phonograph operators such as Louis Glass of San

Francisco. During 1891 he reported that his machines were in use for up to ten hours daily, each bringing in up to $1000 per annum.

In the year Columbia issued a catalogue which contained numerous marches by John Philip Sousa and the United States Marine Band plus items by John Y. Atlee, a government clerk who was also a famed 'artistic whistler' (Gelatt 1977, p. 48). Edison, too, had a top whistler under contract. In an early piece of A&R activity, he came across the black siffleur George Washington Johnson on a ferry from New York to Newark. Johnson was marketed as 'the Whistling Coon', while Edison's team also created dramatic vignettes such as 'Row At A Negro Ball'. According to a recent biographer of the inventor, 'the action started with the playing of a fiddle and banjo, progressed to whiskey drinking and an altercation over a girl, and ended with the drawing of razors, the sound of pistol shots and the arrival of police' (Conot 1979, p. 310).

By 1894, the first seven-inch gramophone records, known as 'plates' were available from Berliner in the USA. The star performer was comic monologuist Russell Hunting while many other releases were anonymous performances of well-known songs by such writers as Stephen Foster (Gelatt 1977, p. 65).

During the 1890s, too, methods of recording large numbers of copies were improved. At the end of the decade, Edison's engineers had perfected a method whereby each performance of a title was recorded onto five master cylinders. In turn, each of these could produce twenty-five duplicates before it was worn out. This method, however, was far inferior to the multiple serial production techniques by which copies of discs could be swiftly manufactured.

Meanwhile hardware became both more sophisticated and cheaper as the decade progressed. Alongside its records, Berliner's United States Gramophone Co marketed three models, including the bargain-priced, manually-driven seven-inch hand gramophone. In the cylinder business, spring-motors were attached to phonographs by Edison and clockwork mechanisms by Columbia. The volume level was raised by replacing rubber horns with metal. Prices dropped as well – to under ten dollars by the turn of the century.

While the United States remained the centre of the music-recording business, the industry took root in Europe and Japan during the last years of the century. The world's first purpose-built record factory was opened in Hanover, Germany in 1898. And perhaps emblematic of the era was the famous incident when the painter Louis Barraud sold his portrait of a dog and a gramophone to Alfred Clark of the London Gramophone Co in 1898. As 'His Master's Voice' it was to become the most ubiquitous trademark of the twentieth century record industry.

Described like this, the 'birth' of a cultural form (recorded popular music) which has since reached 'maturity' seems unproblematic: there is repertoire (performances of an ever-growing range of discrete compositions) and there is the ever-improving technology needed to record and then reproduce it. The pattern makes a neat fit with the rationality of the Williams/Middleton model, which posits the emergence of records at the nexus of developments in technology and in musical instrument design.

But a century ago, the emergence of recorded music was surely all but unproblematic. In this essay, I want to look at some other aspects of that emergence, which are all but ignored in the existing histories. These include the characteristics of sound-recording as a nascent cultural industry and the modes of

listening and identification – the construction of the 'listening subject' – associated with recorded sound.

Talking machine or musical instrument?

While writers over the centuries had foreseen, proposed or fantasised such a development, the arrival of a practicable sound-recording technology brought with it a problem of categorisation. How was this equipment and its activity to be comprehended, conceptualised? Was it an extension of telegraphy, of mechanical musical instruments (the barrel organ, music box, etc.) or was it some kind of automaton, a machine assuming human faculties? Did it copy sound or write it (the terms 'phonograph' and 'gramophone' both derive from the Greek for sound-writing)?

According to Conot, Edison developed the first successful sound-recording mechanism under the pressure of 'four problems' he had to solve:

> One, the most pressing, a speaker for the telephone; two, a copying machine based on the electromographic principle; three, the technology and the devices for autographic telegraph, to be used for transmitting facsimiles of drawings and of handwriting; and four, how to employ the telephone in Western Union operations. (Conot 1979, p. 97)

No mention of music, or even of sound-recording as such. Apart from the first (which involved amplification), Edison's 'problems' were concerned with extending the telephonic transmission principle to visual elements (in essence, our modern facsimile technology) and with the storage of telegraph messages. This last was the Western Union connection. Edison's first use of the term 'phonograph' was in connection with the question of recording the human voice at the receiving end of a telephone line.

As the technology based on tin foil wrapped around a cylinder emerged from Edison's laboratory in 1877, he refined the definition of the new invention. It was to be 'an apparatus for recording automatically the human voice and reproducing the same at any future period'. The definition significantly broadened the field of application of the phonograph and crucially underlined the revolution in the relationship between present and future time implied by the fact of recording.

Writing is a form of recalling elements of the present for the benefit of the future. But to record sound, like taking photographs, was to somehow freeze a moment in time and move it into the future. A humorous piece in *Punch* in 1888 described a mediocre singer 'Signor Foghorni'. 'By applying his ear to this marvellous instrument immediately after singing into it', wrote the humorist, 'he not only hears his song echoed back to him out of the dim future, but he also hears the rapturous applause of unborn millions!'.

What is indicated here, albeit in facetious form, is a phenomenology of recording, the kind of issue which has been explored by such commentators on photography as Sontag (1978) and Barthes, who wrote (1981, p. 4):

> What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.

Change one character in the word 'Photograph' and this is what early listeners to the phonograph had to fit into their worldview. And there were more prosaic aspects to the new relation between present and future. 'I hoard music and

speech', wrote the Reverend Horatio Nelson Powers, in an ode to Edison composed in 1888, linking the power of the phonograph with that of the speculator who could acquire commodities, save them and then sell at the most propitious time (Conot 1979, p. 270).

Very soon after his first successful demonstration of sound-recording, Edison scribbled down in a notebook a list of potential uses for the 'phonograph principle':

- to make Dolls speak, sing, cry and make various sounds
- & also apply it to all kinds of Toys such as Dogs animals, fowls, reptiles, human figures; to cause them to make various sounds
- to Steam Toy Engines exhausts and whistles
- to reproduce from sheets music both orchestral instrumental & vocal, the idea being to use a plate machine with perfect registration & stamp the music out in a press from a die or punch previously prepared by cutting it in steel or from an Electrotype or cast from the original or tin foil
- a family may have one machine & 1000 sheets of the music thus giving endless amusement
- I also propose to make toy music boxes & toy talking boxes playing several tunes
- also to clocks and watches for calling out the time of day or waking a person
- for advertisements rotated continually by clockwork . . . (Conot 1979, p. 107)

Although an article written for publication in the next year (1878) provided a more orderly list of uses for the phonograph (including the office and business aspects that Edison would first strive to develop), here we are close to the unconscious of the phonograph, its psychopathology.

Essentially, Edison's musings envisage two contrasting identities for the new technology: as a talking machine or as a musical instrument. Talking dolls or toys, the clock that calls out, all envisage a machine that interpellates, that hails a human individual. On 18 April 1888, Edison gave a demonstration to the National Academy of Sciences in Washington. It began with a 'metallic voice' saying 'The Speaking Phonograph has the honour of presenting itself to the Academy of Sciences'. During the presentation audience members fainted and one onlooker remarked 'It sounds more like the devil every time'.

This response to the phonograph as diabolical is echoed in later accounts. The ethnomusicologist Christian Leden collecting songs among Eskimos is said to have received the response 'if the demon in the white man's box steals my soul, I must die'. The young Prokoviev wrote in 1908 that 'One of the peasants has bought himself a gramopohone. And now every evening this invention of the devil is placed outside his hut, and begins to gurgle its horrible songs' (Eisenberg 1987, pp. 47, 57).

Another twist to this supernatural dimension of the phonograph was given in 'The Phonograph in Africa' a *New York Times* article of 1885. Reporting that two scientists planned to cross Africa in order to collect specimens of different languages, the author speculates that they could use the talking machine as a means of control and domination:

> The travellers could describe the phonograph as a new and improved portable god, and call upon the native kings to obey it. A god capable of speaking, and even of carrying on a conversation, in the presence of swarms of hearers could be something entirely new in Central Africa, where the local gods are constructed of billets of wood and are hopelessly dumb. (Quoted in Pietz 1987, p. 269)

This power of the phonograph to be a 'talking machine' was rooted in its nature as a recording medium as well as a playback one. As originally constituted, the machine's essential commercial value was to reproduce on a blank cylinder

whatever sounds its operator put there. During the 1890s, advertising campaigns for Columbia's Graphophone slighted playback-only gramophones which were 'limited by their mechanism to imperfect reproductions of specially prepared records'. In contrast, 'the Graphophone does much more; it repeats your voice; your friend's voice; songs sung to it or stories told to it'. In this version, the machine becomes a kind of mechanical echo.

During the 1880s, this awesome 'talking machine' was domesticated for the business market as an early dictaphone. For a variety of technical and economic reasons it was not a success. When the revival of sound-recording occurred it was primarily through the disc, a format incapable of facilitating homemade recordings, but a more effective instrument for relaying music and light entertainment. Edison had earlier written of the manufacture of 'sheets' containing recorded music which could be purchased by 'the family'. It was in this form that the technology became a success in the 1890s.

Music in the home

How to account for this victory of the limited 'playback' variant over the cylinder that could also be used to record? Here the literature on phonograph history is silent – as if pre-recorded music has so much become the norm that nothing else can be imagined. One striking aspect, though, is the similarity to the early development of radio. That, too, was a technology capable of operating as a two-way means of communication. Cultural and political pressures created a way of living called by Raymond Williams 'mobile privatisation' (Williams 1974, p. 26). This entailed 'broadcasting', a 'technology of varied messages to a general public'. Allowing for the other differences in ths two media, this could equally be a description of the phonographic communication process.

One factor continually stressed in contemporary advertising was the value of the new machine as home entertainment. There was a clear resemblance to the status already achieved by the piano. It had become a fixture in American middle-class homes from the 1860s and sales of the instrument reached their height as late as 1899 when they achieved 365,000.

The phonograph did not seriously begin to displace the piano until two decades later. In the 1890s, it had to find a role alongside but distinct from the piano in the American home. That distinctness would seem to be based on a contrast between the 'musica practica' of piano-playing and actual singing in the family circle and, on the other, the passivity of simply listening to phonograph recordings. However, Alan Durant has pointed to a subtle elision between piano and phonograph.

He argues that musical notation, as it developed in the nineteenth century, becomes increasingly

> a set of definitions of aesthetic intention in accordance with which precise execution can be attained . . . notation led to an increasing emphasis on reproduction, as against creative, collaborative performance. Indeed, the term 'reproduction', when used of music, seems to have itself encroached, during this period, upon senses previously attached to the word 'performance'. Durant 1984, pp. 100,101).

To test Durant's observation it would be necessary to analyse the modes of notation and of presentation used by publishers of the bestsellers among the vast number of sheet-music titles and songbooks aimed at this domestic market, but

certainly 'reproduction' is a key term in much phonograph advertising. An 1897 Columbia machine was sold on its ability to 'bring into the home all the pleasures of music, reproducing the performances of bands, orchestras and operatic choruses, as well as of vocal and instrumental soloists . . .' (Gelatt 1977, p. 70).

Durant's argument that 'reproduction' is a defining feature of domestic music is clinched by a discussion of the pianola 'an ambiguous musical instrument, suspended between assisted performance or instruction, and reproduction for more passive listening'. The pianola and other machines using perforated rolls to reproduce performances contributed to this emphasis on replicating the 'precise execution' of an ideal performance of a work.

However, sound-recordings cannot simply be assimilated to this trend among domestic musical instruments. For one thing, the phonograph pre-dated the pianola, which only began to achieve popular acceptance towards the end of the 1890s, in parallel with recorded music. But, more crucially, the pianola – and the sheet music which fed the family piano – enabled the reproduction only of an abstract ideal version of a song or tune.

In contrast, the phonograph provided the trace, the evidence of a specific performance by a specific artist: although some of the earliest commercial releases were anonymous renditions of well-known pieces, these were soon replaced by named singers, bandleaders and monologuists. Much of this range of performers precisely mirrored that of the vaudeville show, which by the 1890s had replaced the minstrel show as the most popular form of musical theatre in America. Thus the catalogue of recordings offered the same range and often the same names as a live concert or music hall show, but in the home. In this sense, recorded music combined the apparent polar opposites of the domestic interior and the vaudeville stage.

Recording and the music industry

It did so, however, in an almost total isolation from the established institutions of the music industry. No music publishers rushed to invest in recording technology. Nor did the Aeolian Organ and Music Company which by the 1890s had come to dominate the pianola business. Instead, the fledgling record industry was controlled by inventors like Edison and Berliner plus a variety of venture capitalists. Notable among these was Jesse Lippincott, the millionaire owner of the Rochester Tumbler Company. Curiously, though Lippincott had previously backed Broadway musicals, he saw the phonograph only as a business machine. When the attempt to market phonographs as stenographic equipment failed and Lippincott himself fell ill in 1890, Edison took back control of much of the cylinder recording business.

Why the music-publishing and musical-instrument industries took little or no interest in recording is a subject crying out for research. Was it because both were at the height of their success and profitability in the final years of the century? Certainly, this was the period when Tin Pan Alley took shape, as a new breed of publishers emerged, concentrating solely on single hit songs, not shows or songbooks or hymnals. And although severely hit by the depression of 1893 – prices dropped by 20 per cent – the sheet music business had reached an estimated $4 million by 1900, equivalent to sales of well over 10 million units. This was the era of such fabled multi-million sellers as Chas K. Harris' 'After The Ball' 'which

quickly reached sales of $25,000 a week, sold more than two million copies in only several years, eventually achieving a sale of some five million' (Hamm 1979, p. 285).

However, total record sales in US were then 2.75 million discs and cylinders, but increasing swiftly. Some publishers did note the fledgling record business, but saw it primarily as another means of advertising their products (Sanjek 1988, p. 417). Since the 1860s, leading singers had been given royalties on sheet-music sales of ballads they promised to feature on stage. Now, recording artists were offered financial inducements to cut new songs by some publishers. One of the earliest pluggers in this field was Len Spencer, himself a prolific recording vocalist. He was the first to sing George M. Cohan's 1899 'I Guess I'll Have To Telegraph My Baby'.

The only publisher to enter the record business on its own account was Stern and Marks in 1897. But this label collapsed when Edison, fearing the competition, withdrew the supply of cylinders. Ultimately, what could be seen as a failure of the publishers to recognise the importance of a new branch of the music industry, led to the dominance of record companies over the publishing business. As early as 1905 the Victor Talking Machine Company had its own copyright department, seeking to buy the rights to songs and tunes recorded by its artists. Today, all but a handful of the leading music-publishing companies are owned by record labels.

There was one aspect of piano rolls, cylinders and discs which did attract the sustained attention of publishers and songwriters: the opportunity for copyright payments. Because of the strength of the Swiss musical-box manufacturers lobby, the 1886 Berne Convention ruled that the mechanical reproduction of music was not an infringement of copyright (Peacock and Weir 1975, p. 49). But the arrival of pianolas and phonographs in large numbers alerted publishers in the USA and Europe to the size of the potential income they were losing.

In France a conflicting series of court judgements began with an 1886 case which went in favour of pianola manufacturers and concluded in 1905 with a Parisian judge holding that recording was 'a mode of performance perfected by performance, and that the rules of plagiarism are applicable to it' (Attali 1985, p. 98). In London, the Appeal Court dismissed the case brought by the music publishers in 1899, while a US Senate committee of 1906 proposed that copyright owners should control the mechanical reproduction of their works. Finally, international pressure combined to ensure that the 1908 revision of the Berne Convention required national governments to protect composers against reproduction of their music by mechanical means.

Ear and eye

Popular music in this century has been so dominated by records and radio that we are in danger of overlooking what must have been a vital shift in the experience of listening to music: the replacement of an audio-visual event with a primarily audio one, sound without vision.

Unlike vaudeville performances or family recitals, the phonograph offered a disembodied voice. In Freudian terms, the invocatory (listening) drive was separated from (or privileged over) the scopic (looking) drive. Interestingly, Edison's first breathless list of outlets for the phonograph included numerous ideas for putting those two drives back together again: the dolls, toy dogs, clocks and so on.

Ten years later, Edison met Eadweard Muybridge, the English photographer most famous for his work in capturing motion in series of pictures.

Inspired by this, Edison began work on what he called a kinetoscope (moving view), writing in 1888: 'I am experimenting upon an instrument which does for the Eye what the phonograph does for the Ear, which is the recording and reproduction of things in motion . . .' (Conot 1979, p. 323). Initially, Edison's team attempted to coordinate sound and moving pictures, but came up only with a few seconds of a man bowing, smiling and taking off his hat while a nearby phonograph repeated his voice. When the kinetoscope was first exhibited in coin-in-the-slot form it showed filmstrips of boximg matches without sound.

The phonograph was therefore condemned to provide sound without an accompanying visual. How did its earliest listeners respond, and does this privileging of the invocatory in the recording process represent a mutation in the character of popular music? There was a technological precedent in the telephone, but there (at least), a *source* for the invisible speaker in space and time could be identified.

The very name 'talking machine' suggests an equivalent need to provide a source for the recorded sound, but as we have seen this source could only be extra-human. The conjectured Africans and the actual Americans were equally discomfited by a machine that took on human attributes.

Nevertheless, within a few years of those reactions, the phonograph and gramophone were taking their place in the drawing-room. How did each listener adapt to the voice without a face? One answer is simply that the question is misplaced. In an article on 'Meaning and the Listening Subject' Sean Cubitt argues simply that it is 'the voice which typically, if not in every case, provides the level of the song which engages our desire most directly' (Cubitt 1984, p. 211).

If this view is accurate, the presence or absence of the visual dimension is irrelevant. There is a famous picture of Feodor Chaliapin listening attentively to his own voice issuing from a gramophone. His eyes are closed, presumably to exclude anything which could interfere with the impact of the sound itself.

But Cubitt's argument was itself developed in an era when the dominance of the invocatory has become the norm. Before the 1890s it would have been inconceivable to her music without seeing it, and seeing it in the process of being produced. One way of comprehending what happened with recording is to posit that the scopic drive was displaced from the body of the singer, the musician and the instrument onto a new physical object, the phonograph or gramophone itself.

The central feature of all early models was the horn, rising majestically from the disc turntable or from the cylinder. The horn is a virtual archetype or genotype of one stream of 'Dionysian' musical instruments, reaching back to the syrinx or pan pipe and aulos mentioned in Plato's *Republic* (Dallas 1974, p. 96). In the Edison cylinder phonograph, the horn acted both as the means by which recordings were made, and the route from which sound issued. It was an ear (to sing and speak into) and also a mouth.

Many early photographs or drawings show listeners with their eyes fixed on the phonograph or gramophone itself. The horn/mouth provided a focus for the scopic drive, but a different kind from that provided by a performer in propria persona. (However Eisenberg comments that 'you can stare into a horn and know that at some vanishing point beyond the visible concavity there is something breathing' Eisenberg 1987, p. 64).

There is an opening here into questions of 'identification' between listener

and singer's voice and issues of modes of address in the lyrics of recorded music. In the growing literature concerned with these matters, a constant theme has been what Alan Durant calls the 'density of second-person pronouns and imperatives' in rock songs – though the same is true of many ballads (Durant 1984, p. 203).

Is there a connection between the voice without a face of the disc or radio broadcast and these complexities and ambiguities of desire and pleasure which the listening subject can map onto it?

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