



# Recorded Sound in the Library of Congress

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SIXTY-FIVE YEARS AGO a note appeared in *Library Journal* which, if prophetic, has proved to be so more in general than specific terms. In any case it turned out to be a very long-range forecast.

The Library of Congress will install a department where phonograph records of speeches of statesmen and distinguished persons will be preserved for the benefit of future generations. The government recently received a record containing an address made by the German emperor, and this led to the suggestion that the utterances of other statesmen might be preserved in the same way.<sup>1</sup>

The phonograph record<sup>2</sup> of Wilhelm II was made at the instigation of E. W. Scripture on January 24, 1904, and was subsequently presented to Herbert Putnam, the Librarian of Congress. It was taken from the Librarian's safe many years later and today occupies a place of honor in the Library's recorded sound collections—no longer the earliest specimen of recording in the collections, but nevertheless the first to arrive.<sup>3</sup>

Growth of the recorded sound collection from that lone cylinder had some time to wait. The collection of more "speeches of statesmen and distinguished persons" had still longer to wait, for the next audible acquisitions appear to have been musical, in the form of rolls for the mechanical player piano, deposited for copyright in the late teens and twenties. While the 1909 copyright law made no provision for the registration of recorded sound, the rolls contained copyrightable printed matter—biographies of composers, analytical and descriptive notes—in addition to the punched holes to activate the piano mechanism. Alas, some rolls were deposited printed, but unpunched.

A bit of prehistory in the Library's sound service was recently discovered in a log book maintained by the reference librarian during the

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years 1900-1901. In those leisurely days it was feasible to note the names of patrons and the subjects of their quests. Not infrequently the subject was simply "Pianola." Thus we learn that on December 6, 1900, Miss Sewell sought the organ music of Bach and "literature," while on the same day Mrs. Sims, together with the Misses Sims and three other companions, came to use the pianola, or player piano. By the autumn of 1901 the pianola entries had become less frequent, but the number of auditors had increased so sharply that attempts to list them by name had been abandoned. On November 19, 1901, while Miss Gland was perusing the scores to "Creole Belles" and "Floradora," there were 142 customers for the pianola, presaging the Library's public concert series or its phonorecord listening service, or both. Were the rolls collected by the Library itself, or did the listeners bring in their own? The latter seems unlikely, since one who purchases rolls might reasonably be expected to have a machine at home on which to play them. In any case both pianola and rolls seem to have vanished some time after November 21, 1901, the date of the last reference to it in the log.<sup>4</sup>

In his report for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1925, the Librarian of Congress announced the gift, from the Victor Taling Machine Company, Camden, N.J., of "an 'Art-Victrola,' electrically run, and an initial selection of 412 double-face disks."<sup>5</sup> In his 1927 report Putnam noted that the same firm had replaced the Art model with a new Orthophonic machine, together with more than 100 discs made by the new electrical process, which "provides us with the latest perfection in such apparatus and the means of expounding it."<sup>6</sup>

Careful inspection of those Victor discs today indicates that neither the Art nor the Orthophonic enjoyed heavy use, an omission in service for which one may be grateful in this day of featherweight playback arms and readily-produced service tapes.

In the same report that heralded the advent of the electrical recording process in the Library's collections, there was a brief note acknowledging the generosity of Robert W. Gordon for the gift of "the complete file of his department 'Old songs that men have sung,' published in *Adventure Magazine* between July 10, 1923, and August 23, 1926, with an unusually rich selection of hitherto unprinted songs of the sea, lumbercamps, Great Lakes, the West, and similar folk ballads."<sup>6</sup> The fact that the Librarian's report for the following year announced Gordon's appointment to direct the activities of the newly founded American Folk Song Project (not yet named the Archive of American Folk Song) should not be precipitously construed as recompense for the gift

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of the magazine columns. Gordon was an ideal man for the job, a student of Harvard's legendary G. L. Kittredge, an assiduous and gifted collector, and one of his generation's most distinguished authorities on American folk songs. That same 1928 report, incidentally, acknowledged Victor's continuing generosity upon the receipt of another 175 discs.<sup>8</sup>

Even before coming to Washington, Gordon had made cylinder recordings of folk songs in the field, and the ensuing years were largely devoted to testing various relatively portable recording devices to facilitate his work at the Library, including the Telegraphone, the Speak-O-Phone, the Amplion, and the Fairchild. Most of the equipment was loaned, donated, or purchased with private funds—also the source of Gordon's own salary. After Gordon left the Library, John A. Lomax continued to collect recordings for the archive on discs, first aluminum, and later acetate. Simultaneously the gifts of commercially published discs from Camden were duly noted year by year.

The pace of activity increased markedly in the years immediately before World War II, both in the acquisition of commercially published records and in the production of instantaneous recordings of folk songs. The former increase was simply the result of the more deliberate solicitation of gifts from the industry—a more nearly comprehensive coverage from Victor, and the first infusions from Columbia and Decca.

The collecting of folk songs was facilitated by a more dramatic event: the establishment, in 1940, of a modern recording laboratory, a completely novel concept in American libraries. A press release announcing the Carnegie Corporation grant which installed the laboratory placed much emphasis on its projected role as disseminator, through a duplication service, of the large accumulation of field recordings in the Archive of American Folk Song. It also projected the unit's utility to other forms of music, recorded poetry and literature, and educational broadcasting, all of which were to materialize during the war years.<sup>9</sup> Other laboratory projects directly related to the war effort included the preparation of recorded instruction in Morse Code and foreign languages for the use of military personnel, and recorded interviews with Marines in the South Pacific—one of several early applications of the not-yet popular technique of oral history in the collections.

The flurry of activities throughout the war resulted in a collection of considerable size and importance—about 30,000 items, not counting a very large transfer of material from the Office of War Information (OWI), at that time not even uncrated but numbering approximately 100,000 items. The next ten years saw the non-OWI figure approach

the 100,000 mark itself (97,937 items in fiscal 1956). The decade of the 1950s saw the sharp proliferation of commercial record labels, and the concomitant strain on gift solicitation work, the beginning of the cataloging of selected long-playing discs, and the distribution of cards to other libraries.

Lacking a specialist in record acquisition, the solicitation of gifts from the industry was largely carried on by the existing staff of the Library's Music Division, principally Harold Spivacke, who had been the division's chief since 1937. It was not until 1960 that a full-time record specialist was appointed, and, after another three years, a separate Recorded Sound Section established to administer the work of the Laboratory and the development and service of the audio collections. The service role was, in fact, new to the Library at this juncture, since there had been virtually no listening service until 1963. In 1964, annual acquisitions moved from the four to the five-figure column, and has remained there ever since, resulting in a collection now nearing the half-million mark. Nonetheless, annual acquisitions figures have varied widely, from just over 11,000 to nearly 40,000, depending on the receipt of very large collections of early recordings from private donors and the transfer of still larger collections from other governmental agencies such as the American Forces Radio and Television Service. The gifts of current long-playing records from the record industry have remained more or less constant in recent years from 10,000 to 12,000 items. It is certain that the recently passed law providing for the registration for copyright of published sound recordings will increase the figure; but the extent of the increase cannot be accurately gauged at this writing.<sup>10</sup>

The present recorded sound holdings at the Library of Congress can be broadly divided into two categories—published and unpublished—the latter not infrequently referred to as instantaneous, whether in the form of wax cylinder, aluminum or acetate disc, magnetic wire, or tape. Except for the difficulty in distinguishing the original from the copy, they are comparable to manuscripts.

The published holdings are represented by the trickle, that began with the first Victor gift, that developed into a growing flood in the war years and has continued. This meant that virtually the entire era of acoustical recording (before 1925) was unrepresented in the Library's collections, and had to be filled in with the cooperation, through gift, of private citizens who had husbanded these early sound documents, many of them quite precious today. One of the most important gifts was the John Secrist Collection, devoted almost exclusively to opera

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singers of the period 1900-1925 and collected in an uncommonly discriminating manner. Except for massive holdings of Caruso, McCormack, and Ponselle, it concentrates on selected discs of most of the period's singers, usually their rarest discs, and usually only those in excellent physical condition.<sup>11</sup>

Complementing the Secrist Collection in content and contrasting with it in scope is the large Jim Walsh Collection, assembled by the long-time editor of the "Pioneer Recording Artists" department of *Hobbies* magazine, and highly regarded authority on the history of the recording industry. Walsh, while a collector of exceedingly catholic taste, has collected most vigorously the performers of the music hall, vaudeville, and other popular musical genres about whom he writes so authoritatively.<sup>12</sup>

Barring that 1904 voice of the German Emperor, the unpublished side of the collection began with the American Folk Song Project.<sup>13</sup> The recording laboratory's not infrequent habit of recording poets when they visited the Library during the war years provided the foundation of the English-language Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature, which has developed along lines similar to the folksong collection.<sup>14</sup> More recently the Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape has done a similar thing for the readings of poets from Spain, Portugal, and Latin America.<sup>15</sup> These three discrete collections are well documented and indexed by specialists on the library staff, and have provided material for publication on long-playing discs. Also discrete are the collections of performances which have taken place in the Library since the recording laboratory's beginning, including lectures, readings, plays, and chamber music concerts. Many of these have been broadcast nationally for a number of years, and a few of the concerts have been issued on commercial labels.

The remaining unpublished collections are vast, and are under varying degrees of index control. Their range includes material of broadcast origin donated by networks and private individuals (extensive runs of the "Meet the Press" program and the Metropolitan Opera are examples), and other material privately recorded (concert hall recordings donated by composers and performers, and the National Press Club luncheon speakers are typical).

While the recording laboratory has contributed to the growth of the collections by making original recordings, and providing researchers with a duplication service and two catalogs of published long-playing records,<sup>16</sup> its most far-reaching effect will prove to be in its research

into the preservation of the varied recorded sound media and in the application of the results of that research. The 1960s might be called the "post Pickett-Lemcoe decade" by those dealing in the physical preservation of recorded sound. As a result of that initial study by Pickett and Lemcoe,<sup>17</sup> the library has cleaned, repackaged, and reshelved a substantial part of the collection, using the shelf equipment and packaging materials recommended by the report, and has applied the recommended atmospheric controls in the stacks. The laboratory has also dubbed onto 1.5 mil polyester-base tape approximately 15,000 fragile and deteriorating wax cylinders, acetate discs, paper and acetate tapes, and even a number of rare published shellac pressings (the Secrist Collection has been dubbed *in toto*). The dubbing process has provided the added benefit of contents notes, made while the dubs are being monitored, resulting in index cards for much previously unanalyzed material.

New developments in magnetic recording will undoubtedly do much to ameliorate the space problem in all audio collections. The recording laboratory is watching closely the gradually improving sonic quality of reduced tape speeds, and the possibilities offered by multi-track recording. Currently under way is the experimental dubbing of monaural opera broadcast acetate tapes onto eight separate tracks, at a speed reduced from 15 to 7½ inches per second. Similar experimentation in the laboratory during the 1960s has produced a collection of several dozen reproducing styli adaptable to all discs and cylinders thus far encountered, dating from 1890 to the present; a cylinder reproducing device adjustable to all known mandrel sizes, speeds, and groove spacings; and a record cleaning bath activated by ultrasonics.

The archival videotaping of the library's concerts, lectures, and readings has been going on for three years. There has been some experimentation with the field collecting of folksong materials with both portable videotape equipment and sound film. The distribution of these materials by television broadcasting or video-cassettes, is a possibility that no longer seems novel.

And what of that collection of statesmen and distinguished persons predicted by *Library Journal* in 1907? By virtue of the overall growth of the collection and the immense variety of its sources, such a collection now exists. The efforts of the Victor and Edison companies during the election years of 1908 and 1912 resulted in a number of recorded addresses by such notables as Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson, all of which have come to the library from a variety of private donors. The Jim Walsh Collection is particularly

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rich in the Columbia-affiliated "Nation's Form" series, issued late in World War I and continuing through the 1920 presidential campaign. It includes the voices of Senators Lodge and Harding, Generals Pershing and Leonard Wood, Nicholas Murray Butler, Rabbi Stephen Wise, and Wilson's young Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt. To be sure, the collection of historic speeches is not yet what it should be in America's national library, particularly from the years before network broadcasting and the convenience of audio and videotape. Since 1907, however, steps have been taken in the right direction.

### *References*

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6. ———. *Report of the Librarian of Congress for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1927*. Washington, D.C., 1927, p. 12.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 104-05.
8. ———. *Report of the Librarian of Congress for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1928*. Washington, D.C., 1928, pp. 10, 124, 144.
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