Sound Recordings in the Music Library:
With Special Reference to Record Archives

EDWARD E. COLBY

In the over-all consideration of music library materials, the sound recording stands as the infinitely reproducible documentation of the musical performance. Formal education of the music student in the United States and elsewhere almost invariably requires its use as the sonant counterpart of the printed or handwritten score. While it does not replace live audition, participation, practice, or analytical study, the recording is commonly used as a substitute for the first of these activities and as an aid to all four. To those unskilled in the reading of a musical score, the recorded performance is the immediate means of access to the musical literature of past and present, including works of remote periods and geographical areas seldom heard in the concert hall.

Exotic musics not amenable to traditional systems of Western notation find in the sound recording their most authentic representation; native instruments are employed "on location" and the characteristic nuances of rhythm and melody are preserved without the limited intermediary of notated time and pitch values. The art of improvisation found here, as in jazz and in certain types of European vocal and instrumental music, could hardly ask for a more faithful mnemonic handmaid than the recording apparatus.

Although there is little need to stress the importance of sound recordings in the year 1960, the preceding remarks may provide a basis for the discussion of their specific values and for an appraisal of some of the actualities and potentialities in their use and preservation. Subjects outside the scope of this paper are: (1) the cataloging of recordings, (2) the physical aspects of record storage and preservation, and (3) the mechanical handling of record collections. A code

The author is Lecturer in Music, Music Librarian, and Archivist, Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound, Stanford University.
for the cataloging of sound recordings is in use in the United States, and the results of a study on the preservation of discs and tape, financed by the Rockefeller Foundation, have recently been published. Library handling of record collections has been described in a number of articles in library literature; such articles are readily accessible through the appropriate indexes.

Historical particulars of the recording industry have been documented by such writers as F. W. Gaisberg and Roland Gelatt. The story in broad terms is one of the interaction of artistry, technology, and public taste, with the energy of the promoter and the skill of the salesman acting as catalysts. Optimum results have generally derived from a combination of excellence in performance and engineering and an increasing public awareness of the cultural values in music.

What are the physical media on which sound is recorded? Monaural and stereophonic magnetic tape and microgroove discs are most commonly employed today. Until 1928 wax cylinders were manufactured, and rolls for player pianos still enjoyed a modest vogue. Prior to the general adoption of tape, magnetic wire experienced a measure of popularity. Sound film is a staple in the motion picture industry, and has been used for the removal of surface noise in the process of transferring performances of music from older discs to the new microgroove pressings. Videotape, containing simultaneously perceptible audible and visual signals, is familiar to viewers of television. Various other electronic devices have been used to store and reproduce musical sounds. Among the most recent developments are a magnetized sheet of paper, reported from Japan, and a thin disc which may be rolled up and mailed in a tube.

Although the first Edison cylinder (1877) was a “poetry” recording (the inventor recited “Mary Had a Little Lamb”) and although popular songs, comic monologues and dialogues, instrumental music and political addresses were recorded, the period of the acoustic recording (1900-1925) is generally associated with the “golden age” of opera singing, the period of Caruso, Hempel, Sembrich, Plançon, Tamagno, and others. These artists established the recording as a document of serious artistic value, and at the same time, through the application of the operatic-concert voice to the sentimental song as well as to the aria, made mass reproduction of a higher type of music economically feasible.

The period of the electric recording (1925-1948) witnessed the expansion of instrumental music on discs and the recording of com-
plete operas on a much larger scale than had been attempted on the old acoustic pressings. Full symphonies and complete string quartets took the place of such single movements as the Largo from Dvořák’s “New World” symphony and the Andante Cantabile from Tchaikovsky’s Opus 11 quartet. Beethoven’s “Moonlight” came to represent the entire sonata, not simply the first movement. Certain composers were favored with recorded Gesamtausgaben, often sponsored by societies; American jazz attained further recorded recognition. With the electric disc there came into being the historical anthology on records, notably L’Anthologie Sonore, the Columbia History of Music through Eye and Ear, and Two Thousand Years of Music, supervised by Curt Sachs. The musical world, not only of the scholar, but of the student and layman, was enlarged to include the distant past. At the same time this world turned outward, beyond the confines of traditional Western music, with recordings of Brazilian folk songs, the rhythms of Africa, and Musik des Orients.

The development of the long playing microgroove disc and of the magnetic tape recording resulted in an incredibly vast extension of all the fields mentioned above. Complete symphonies became available on single discs, even on single sides of discs, and the weight of complete opera recordings was reduced from bulky ten or twelve pocket albums without diminution of content. The use of magnetic tape, apart from its function as a recording medium per se, facilitated the production of disc recordings; taped performances of European orchestras, frequently performing the works of American composers, have been used in preference to more expensive domestic renditions of the same works. Well-known orchestras and soloists have been accorded nicknames or outright anonymity to conform to the requirements of lower price labels. It must be said that there is now available in recorded literature a wealth of music and musical performances almost visionary in scope.

It is perhaps this very amplitude of resources which causes the lacunae to stand out more prominently. Works in the standard repertory are represented by multiple performances; more obscure but no less valuable compositions are rarely recorded, and if at all, are issued by small firms enjoying a short or uncertain life. But such new historical anthologies as the History of Music in Sound and the Archive Production of the Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft represent serious efforts to correct this situation. Discs are as subject to out-of-print status as are books. Important performances of artists no longer on the
concert stage are dropped from the catalogs or relegated to a semi-active listing. The network of international record distribution brings some European pressings into domestic listings, others do not appear. Private and semi-private recordings, some of which are extremely valuable, usually remain unknown and unattainable.

To make at least a portion of this recorded wealth available to the general music-lover, the circulating collection and the sound-proof booths in the music library have taken the place of the listening gallery known to historians of the recording industry. In schools, colleges and universities, the services provided are generally adapted to the needs of students and faculty. Recordings are used in the classroom as a standard teaching aid, and in the studio to afford the student an opportunity to hear his own performance and observe his own progress. For individual or small group listening, facilities are available in the general or departmental library, and in at least one place circulating collections of recordings for dormitory use are in operation.

One of the basic values of music recordings is, of course, to provide greater access to a wider variety of musical literature than is available in live performance. In the appreciation and analysis of all musical compositions, the ease of repeated audition of a given work or movement is a feature welcome to instructor and student alike. The recording offers opportunity for comparison of performances by various artists and ensembles, whether they are vocal or instrumental soloists, conductors, chamber music groups, orchestras, or choruses. With a diversity of interpretations of the same work accessible in recorded form, the aspiring musician is in an excellent position to compare details of tempo, phrasing, dynamics, and texture. Through recordings the student may fix in his consciousness the tone quality of a clarinet, a violoncello, a trumpet, a celesta. Or going beyond these members of the modern orchestra, he may hear a Baroque organ, the Siena pianoforte, the tone of a famous Italian violin. The recent set of recordings in which a single composition is heard performed on a number of historical pipe organs is one example of what may be achieved with this type of demonstration. In the field of vocal music, where the novice must form his own concept of tone without the medium of an artifact, another type of listening comes into play; the student may concentrate not only on phrasing and diction, but on the basic means of tone-production.

Examples could be multiplied indefinitely to illustrate the ways
in which recordings can be used actively and profitably in the home, classroom, and studio. Use of this kind rests on an assumption that has far-reaching implications for library service, an assumption that discs are expendable, that their life is limited to something between fifty and a hundred plays, after which they will be discarded and replaced by the same title, if it is available, or by another if it is not. But there remains another aspect of record collecting which more and more libraries are taking into account in their planning. This is the concept of the archive, the acquisition of recordings for preservation and future use. The problems presented by this area are of still broader scope and greater complication than those connected with circulating of reference collections. Harold Spivacke, chief of the Music Division, Library of Congress, spoke at length to this point in an address before the International Association of Music Libraries in Cambridge, England, in June 1959. "In the field of sound recordings," said Spivacke, "the need to acquire certain publications is indeed urgent, for they quickly go out of print and soon become hard to obtain." But the difficulties do not end there: "The librarian is torn between his obligation to serve his constituency and his desire to preserve his collection. . . . The visual act of reading a book does not in itself injure the book. On the other hand, each playing of a sound recording causes more or less deterioration of the recording itself."

While acquisition of recordings for current use is more or less a selective process based primarily on musical content and secondarily on interpretation and engineering, acquisition for archival purposes is necessarily comprehensive, or selective on a broad categorical basis. The recording for which no specific need is apparent at the moment may develop considerable value within fifty to one-hundred years. Since archival recordings may be used as sociological as well as musical documents, types of music not ordinarily required for class work may come within the purview of the historical collection.

In general terms there are three facets to the problem of collecting materials for an archive of sound recordings. First, there is the recovery of early materials. This includes not only acoustic discs and cylinders dating back to the beginnings of the record industry, and a large number of "singles" and albums from the electric period, but, in addition, a substantial number of the ten thousand long-play pressings dropped from the catalogs of major and minor manufacturers during the first ten years of microgroove output. Second, there are the current pressings, domestic and foreign. Here selectivity must
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operate to eliminate duplicates of the same recordings under different labels and serial numbers, and international agencies must cooperate in locating commercial recordings made primarily for local distribution abroad. The third facet, probably the most complicated, involves the procurement of noncommercial recordings of all periods and from all politically accessible countries.

Important archival collections of sound recordings now in existence fall under the following types of ownership: (1) national archives, such as the French Phonothèque Nationale, the Italian Discoteca di Stato and the British Institute of Recorded Sound; (2) institutional archives, such as the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library and the Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound; (3) radio and television stations—the collection of the British Broadcasting Corporation is regarded as one of the most noteworthy in this category; (4) manufacturers of recordings and recording machines—archival material in these collections consists largely of "masters" cut by the company and its predecessors; (5) private collectors. As with collectors of books and musical scores, private collectors of sound recordings have played and will continue to play a most important role in the preservation of priceless materials. A number of private collections, generally outstanding in quality and quantity, are described in a recent issue of HiFi Review.7

Together the interests of these various agencies and individuals represent a comprehensiveness which may approach in some measure what Spivacke has designated as "the same type of universal collection of recordings as the universal collections of books and scores available to us in great libraries throughout the world." At the present time this integration is purely hypothetical; the de facto situation is one of specialization along lines of national output, interest in particular categories of content, program collections, and the labels of given manufacturers. The Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress and the archive of jazz at Tulane University in New Orleans are examples of such specialization by category, although specialization does not necessarily imply the exclusion of other types of material. The field of recorded music is so vast that there is every reason for specialization to continue so that, in the words of Spivacke, "at least one library in the world will preserve a specific work, should others fail to acquire it."6

With the maintenance of present national collections, with the establishment of national collections where none now exist, and with
the cooperation of all agencies and individuals, there are several ways of deriving universality out of the current condition of separateness. Exception must be made, of course, for the restrictions still raised by political boundaries, though it is important that every effort be made, possibly through the good offices of Unesco, to assure as wide a coverage as possible. Of prime importance is the centralization and exchange of discographic information, perhaps through a project similar to the International Inventory of Musical Sources. Another possibility would involve the establishment of a center similar to that operated by University Microfilms in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to which center archives would send copies of their recordings, and from which center further copies would be sent to individuals and institutions requiring them for scholarly use. If this did not prove practicable, such a center might function as a clearinghouse, maintaining catalogs of the subscribing archives, and putting the prospective borrower in touch with the source of the desired materials. A third method, the stocking of a number of “universal” collections throughout the world, would require an even greater application of cooperative effort. With today’s high-speed copying equipment, it is probable that technical difficulties would pose fewer problems than would the human relations involved. It is understood, however, that the legal aspects of the copying of sound recordings are at present under serious study, and some important decisions will have to be made to clear the way for cooperative projects of the kind suggested.

Universal or specialized, an archive of sound recordings should not exist solely for preservation, though admittedly this is its primary purpose. Without preservation there is no assurance of continued availability for use; without use, preservation, a perfectly legitimate end in itself, assumes a remoteness frustrating to the pursuit of the knowledge represented by the materials preserved. In the field of music, as in other fields, an archive of recorded sound should provide all the services of a large reference library, including the making of copies for educational or research purposes. Opportunities for research and practical application are manifold, and it will suffice to suggest a few subjects of study for which such an archive may provide essential source materials.

(1) The history of the career of a major artist qua performer, documented by all available recordings ever made by that artist. The various “takes” of a given composition would have to be included, even if made at a single recording session. In this way, the artistic com-
ponents of a masterly performance could be studied in somewhat the same manner that a composer's sketches are used to study his technique of composition. This procedure could lead to a study of the artist's career in toto, or to the study of an artist's rendition of the same work or a group of works at various periods of his professional development. It would be interesting, for example, to compare the performance of Franz Liszt from recorded sources, if any existed, with the Lisztian tradition as handed down through his pupils.

(2) Comparison of performances of the same composition by different performers. This type of study could be integrated with certain aspects of the type suggested in the preceding paragraph. While it is true that such comparison is feasible with recordings currently available through domestic trade channels, the ultimate aim of scholarship here, as with manuscript and printed materials, should be encyclopedic in nature, and from the resources of an archive the range of examples could be extended far beyond present limitations. The term "encyclopedic" suggests the eventual preparation of an encyclopedia of musical performance, which would give to this vital aspect of music the same detailed attention now devoted to history, theory, style analysis, and biobibliography.

(3) The analysis of a given style of performance characteristic of a given historical period. This subject is known to musical scholarship as performance practice, a term derived from the German Aufführungspraxis, and must now be studied on the basis of early didactic treatises and from the internal evidence of the music. Although the full value of recorded performances in this area of research might not be realized for another fifty years or longer, we are already sufficiently distant from certain practices of the first two decades of the present century to make such a study of immediate value to the student born in the early 1930's. Tempos, treatment of rhythmic details, balance, tone quality—these and other components of performance are readily ascertainable from recordings of the period.

(4) A living art must put scholarship to practice. The recordings used for research can be of inestimable value to the vocalist or instrumentalist in bringing to life styles of singing and playing, of interpretation and tone production no longer generally heard in concert or on the operatic stage. This is particularly true of singing, where in matters of purity of tone, intonation, and breathing, to name but a few factors, the present generation of students has much to learn. Many operas which have been dropped from the repertoire for want of
adequately trained singers could in all probability be successfully revived if the older recordings could be made effective in vocal training.

(5) Authentic interpretations, performed or conducted by the composer himself, and thus bearing the stamp of his authority, or dramatic performances in which the soloists are coached by the composer, can be faithfully recorded on disc or tape. These are of value in recreating subsequent performances of the same composition, and are accessible on sound recordings, from Verdi to Stravinsky.

An authentic performance is never superseded, even by the artist himself. Original recordings, particularly the oldest, should be carefully preserved, since they constitute the basic documents of recorded sound, analogous in a sense to original manuscripts and early printed editions.

Sound film and videotape play an important role in an archive of recorded music. There are many types of musical works: opera, ballet, and dances of all kinds, in which the relationship of sight to sound is an intrinsic part of the aesthetic experience. In the preservation of these forms, audio-visual media should be employed wherever appropriate. The study of techniques of conducting, string instrument bowing and so forth, might also be effectively pursued through a combination of the visual and the audible.

It is not to be understood that the sole beneficiaries of such an archival program are scholars and students in educational institutions. Through individual and group listening facilities, through planned concerts using archive materials, and eventually through enlarged channels of commercial or noncommercial distribution, much of this material may be made available to the layman.

It would be possible to cite further evidence to confirm the view that there should be systematic acquisition and intelligent use of sound recordings for the purposes of an archive, but the preceding remarks have attempted to review some of the principal arguments for a collection of this kind. Not all libraries will be in a position to carry out such a program, but there should be a few, well placed geographically and well endowed financially, where the infinitely reproducible documentation of musical performance is not regarded as indefinitely expendable, but is organized and preserved to constitute a new major resource for the knowledge and practice of the art of music.
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References


