

SPINNING THE RECORD

An Illustrated History of the Recording Industry
and its Interrelationship with Art Music



By Lynn René Bayley

Spinning the Record
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Introduction

In recent years there have been a number of books appearing that examine the history of the recording industry, specifically as it pertains to classical or art music. The best of these, like Colin Symes' "Setting the Record Straight", also examine the business of the record industry, its goals and marketing techniques, and how it affected or did not affect popular culture. But even the best of such books are flawed because they omit several important parallel developments, such as radio, sound film and broadcasts, all of which not only impacted our culture but also interacted with the phonograph. And, because these books are written by musical academics whose sole interest is classical music, they reveal little or no understanding of nor sympathy for jazz, the one major musical art form whose history roughly parallels that of the phonograph itself, or folk music, which has impacted every form of music in all centuries.

Such a complex interconnection suggests that previous books on the subject are merely the tip of a very large iceberg, and in a way this is true; but although I cannot and will not promise to examine the entire iceberg—no one book could possibly do that—I will reveal more of it than has previously been seen or suggested. For the history of sound recording, and its profound impact on both the culture and history of music, is one of the most important and substantial events of the 20th and early 21st centuries. Indeed, I believe that, when examined in the proper light, the cultural impact of sound recording is equal in importance to that of the written word.

In fact, that influence began very early on. By 1903, Béla Bartók and Zoltan Kodaly were collecting authentic Hungarian and Magyar folk music on cylinder recordings; the major record labels of the day were inaugurating large and eventually comprehensive libraries of music for home listening and academic study; and performing musicians, especially singers, were being influenced by the recorded performances of their peers. Fifteen years later, at the height of World War I, recordings began to be used for consolation and the cross-pollination of musical influences from all countries. By 1923, when the first legitimate classical broadcasts had begun and the first record magazine launched (The Gramophone), there was a large number of musicians and composers who considered the phonograph more than just a toy; but it was only with the advent of electrical recording in 1925 that the legacy of recordings began to assume a greater importance within and without the musical community. Eventually, as we shall see, the various performance styles and performance practices that were prevalent in the early years of the century either atrophied or were replaced by other styles and practices because the phonograph revealed flaws and/or inconsistencies which, for better or worse, were "corrected" by its influence.

Although we will examine these advancements chronologically as we proceed through this book, a few are worth noting out of context. Perhaps the most important are the reduction and eventual disappearance of portamento and excessive rubato in the performance of all types of music, instrumental and vocal; the gradual change from performing Baroque music with legato phrasing consonant with Romantic and post-Romantic styles to a crisp, rhythmically accented style partly influenced by jazz; the rhythmic improvement of jazz itself from a stiffish, loping beat to a more sophisticated, swinging one; the gradual but discernible improvement in orchestral playing to a level that was inconceivable even in the 1940s; and the

subtle but important “replacement” of voice-types for various operatic roles or lieder conditioned by what had become fashionable or popular on records. All these things, and more, are examined in detail throughout this book.

In essence the history of recorded music, specifically that of art music, was always an uneasy blend of business, science and art. The dissemination of great music was dependent for most of its history on the willingness and capabilities of the recording companies to grant listeners the opportunity to hear, and keep, whatever music they felt had a viable market. In recent decades, the shoe has been on the other foot: the widespread use of digital recording and its easy access to consumers via digital tape recorders, CD burners, Internet downloads and iPods has made the marketing techniques of the record companies tenuous at best, marginal at worst. The real problem, as we shall see, is not how much music is available but an attitude of *laissez-faire* towards classical music and jazz that is shocking to those of us raised in the traditions of such music. In a sense, the worst fears of sociologists such as Oswald Spengler, Theodor Adorno and Ray Bradbury have come true: advances in technology have created a monster whose appeal is in the technology itself, not what message the technology conveys; and the rise of the “entertainment industry,” specifically the American entertainment industry, has so come to dominate world culture that anything artistic is marginalized to its own freakish sort of “marketing niche” that uses it to sell product, calm jangled nerves and increase the thinking speed of infants so that they can compete in the workplace by the time they’re in the fifth grade.

We are, however, getting ahead of ourselves. To start, let us return to those “glorious” days of yesteryear when the technology was new, the world seemed poised to accept and embrace great music alongside their pop culture, and the early pioneers of recording history fought amongst each other like cats and dogs.

I should mention at the beginning, however, that this book does not have any footnotes. Why? Because footnotes are just a scholarly device intended to “prove” that the author knows what he or she is talking about. But since the conclusions drawn in this book are the product of my own recollections and thinking, the only research I did was to find articles clarifying some dates and events, hunting down record labels and cover art, and researching the history of various labels and aspects of recording technology. And I did all this on the Internet. We all know that the Internet contains a good deal of misinformation, but it is also a repository for well-researched articles and what I call “reference articles” in which links to other web pages are embedded. I am particularly indebted to four sources for much of my information and rare illustrations: Steven C. Barr, a Canadian researcher, whose history of the Berliner and Compo companies were clear, concise and overwhelmingly complete (www.capsnews.org/barrber.htm); Wikipedia, the free web encyclopedia, whose entries on various labels and artists proved to be a gold mine (www.wikipedia.com); and Mainspring Press, a website with articles, catalog pages and labels culled from their various “history of the phonograph” books (<http://www.mainspringpress.com/home.html>); and Steve Schoenherr’s *Recording Technology History* which, in addition to having a voluminous amount of information, also contained many important embedded links (<http://history.acusd.edu/gen/recording/notes.html>).

Among the gems to be found at Mainspring Press, I would like to cite three: *American Record Label Image Encyclopedia*, by Kent Nauck; *The Origins of Okeh*, by Allan Sutton; and *A Red Seal by Any Name: The Opera Disc Story*, by Allan Sutton. Other sources included 78-rpm Online Label Scans (<http://78online.com/data/index.php>), Jazz labels (www.trombone-usa.com/jazz-labels), Record Label List (www.rainierjazz.com/RecArchive/Rec_list.htm), Emile Berliner- History of the Phonograph (<http://inventors.about.com/od/gstartinventions/>

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a/gramophone.htm), and History of the 45-rpm record (www.45-rpm.org.uk/history.html). My technical information for CD-R and CD-RW was obtained from http://searchstorage.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid5_gci508949,00.html. But, considering the transitory nature of Internet web sites and pages – some of those I researched and obtained illustrations and information when I began this book were already gone by the time I finished it – it is doubtful how many you will be able to pull up yourself. I suppose the lesson to be learned here is that, like a CD you really want, get it when you see it. In our “transitory society,” everything is disposable, including information.

In later chapters of the book, all record labels and album covers are from my own collection. Perhaps because the LP era is considered less “romantic” than that of the 78, finding any labels or cover art after 1952 was exceedingly difficult on the Internet.