

SOUND ARCHIVES: The Role of the Collector and the Library

I am a thief. I have stolen phonograph records from a public library. However, before I am either commended for baring my soul or condemned for my crime, I must add that I confess not to relieve the burden of guilt but to make a point.

First the details of the misdeed: One day as I pawed my way through the large and well-appointed record collection of a major urban library, cheerfully anticipating the pleasure of listening to an old, much-beloved set of l.p.'s that I had checked out many times before, I made the disappointing discovery that the set was not there. Mildly surprised--the audience for this group of performances, though very devoted, was small--I looked into the card catalog and failed after much searching to turn up the cards for the set. With mounting anxiety, I went to the circulation desk.

"They're gone," said the librarian.

"Gone?"

"Yes. The cards are removed when the records are disposed of."

"Disposed of?"

"Yes. That particular set went in the last weeding."

"Went where?" (In an aghast-patron voice.)

"To the city incinerator. It was scratched and worn out." (In a reasonable-but-expecting-trouble voice.)

"Destroyed? Adolph Busch incinerated?" (In a choking voice, my hands around my own throat to prevent them from being around hers.)

This was followed by a short, not very coherent lecture from me on the greatness, historical importance, rarity (which I recall ranking at the level of the Rosetta Stone), and generally irreplaceable sublimity of the Busch Op. 6 Handel.

"I told you it was scratched and worn out." (In an I-get-'em-all-on-this-shift tone.)

"They were some of the first long-playing records ever made. They were practically born scratched and worn out!"

This futile outburst was answered by the clincher, delivered in the best ALA Combat Manual manner and followed by a haughty about-face: "This is a public library. We do not keep material for historical purposes."

My response was an about-face of my own: I marched back to the record collection, pulled out a dozen ancient and treasured probable candidates for the next weeding, and walked out of the library with them. This was meant to be a moral gesture, but security in that library being what it was, it turned out to be merely convenient thievery. The beginning of my criminal career was also the end--not being a fan of situation ethics, I knew I wouldn't have been able to keep it up without remorse--but the issues raised by this incident remain important.

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### Practical aims or historical goals?

After all, my librarian was right; Ranganathan's First Law of Library Science is Books are for use,<sup>1</sup> and that includes records deemed no longer usable that must make way for those that are. Furthermore, the library had several other recorded versions of the music in the weeded set, and "interest in the disc as such is secondary to interest in the musical work recorded."<sup>2</sup> These are the words of the pioneering music librarian and bibliographer Vincent Duckles, who has been careful to distinguish the practical aims of the academic library (similar to those of the large public library in this respect) from those of the history-minded. "This rather casual attitude toward some of the niceties of record collecting may seem like heresy to the specialist in rare discs, but we do not hesitate to depart from the purist's point of view in more than one instance."<sup>3</sup>

Such "purist" preoccupations as the recording history and the recorded repertoire of certain artists find almost as little support among academic librarians as among public librarians, a conclusion implicit in the almost complete neglect of such subject matter in the music library literature and explicit in the literature of education for music librarianship. For instance, Michael Ochs' rigorous "Taxonomy of Qualifications for Music Librarianship"<sup>4</sup> gives space to "Knowledge of the Music and Recording Trades" and "Knowledge of the Criteria for Evaluating Recordings of Music," but such knowledge is regarded as undemanding and oriented toward such practical considerations as distortion levels and singers' reputations. Knowledge of records is given a very small place in his overall cognitive scheme, and it is never tied in with proper knowledge of music history and musical analysis.

In short, the librarian confronted with this difficult patron responded on several reasonable assumptions: Weeding of material is a necessary part of the process of serving the public; the highest priorities in accession and deaccession are reserved for consideration of maximum usage; within certain limitations of product quality, developing a collection in terms of repertoire is far more important than choosing performers and performances; knowledge of performers and performances is, anyway, distinctly secondary in music education and appreciation. There is a good deal of truth (although in descending quantities as one moves through the sequence) in all of these assumptions, but a major problem still remains: A great, very elusive, and at least minimally serviceable recording was destroyed. This latter description is based on the assumption that no one took a blowtorch to the records since my last borrowing of them; on the belief that my criteria for judging a record's usability aren't merely masochistic (most people, I believe, are willing to listen through a lot of noise in order to hear something they cherish and cannot replace); and on my experience at Friends of the Library sales, where I have picked up many a "disposed of" disc in far better shape than my long-lost Columbia SL-158.

This last point deserves elaboration: A record company executive, an old friend, once described the collecting habits of a certain fanatic

(me) to a colleague who is one of the acknowledged giants among collectors. "But does he go to library sales?" To the affirmative answer came a nod of approval, "That is the mark of the true collector." We all love a good treasure hunt, but there is something faintly ridiculous about the library as both benefactor to the privileged antiquarian book and record trades and as starved civic churchmouse.

### "Unrecognized archives"

Those who collect for love will always know their fields better than those who collect for money (at least a librarian's money), and in their devotion will always be able to exploit the latter in their indifference. But economics aside, there are larger questions about the role of the library behind my complaints. The former head of Stanford University's Archive of Recorded Sound, Edward Colby, used the term "unrecognized archives" to describe "out-of-print long-play recordings interfiled with in-print discs in listening room or home-use collections."<sup>5</sup> The trouble with this phrase is that it is misleading: A collection which is doomed in the ordinary course of events to be forgotten or dispersed, sold or destroyed piecemeal, is not an archival collection, unrecognized or otherwise. This is the heart of the matter: The librarian who drove me to crime was obviously correct in distinguishing between the role of libraries and archives, but libraries--by virtue of the fact that they are usually the principal acquirers of the artifacts of communication--inevitably become custodians of many of these "unrecognized archives." To the degree that they ignore this, they are sloppy custodians indeed.

Most librarians have some awareness of this problem, and they generally regard it as the breaks of the trade. There is only so much time--and even less money--and the archival instinct to preserve can too easily hinder the librarian in a commitment to the aforementioned First Law. Still, everyone has stories: I know an enterprising head of a struggling urban library who recently rummaged through a few likely stacks and with disconcerting ease turned up an original John Adams letter. Then there is the scholar I met who, having done research in a few ancient English public schools, is convinced that the reason we have no Shakespeare holographs is simply that they are all crammed in a basement stack of some public school library, slowly turning into sludge.

There are, of course, many libraries with good, well-tended local history collections and active archival collection policies; there are even some on speaking terms with local historical societies. However, there is nearly always a large conceptual and practical gap between the historical collection and the circulating collection--materials do not travel from one to the other, and historical collections rarely include recordings. This is in spite of the fact that there is a great deal of local recording activity in this country; the resulting records and tapes seldom make it to the library at all, let alone into a historical collection. As a result their preservation is in the hands of friends who generally consign them to the dustbin of history (read: The Salvation Army) after a polite interval.

True, the number of people who want to know what the high school band sounded like in 1965 is small, but this was also once true of the number of patrons who wanted a particular old newspaper to determine whether great-great-uncle Fred ever married. Granted, libraries--like other public institutions--must respond to the fads of the people. Genealogy is probably more popular than the history of amateur music-making ever will be. However, local recordings, like local newspapers, can reveal much about a community's cultural life--and occasionally they are even musically significant. The movement for mass musical education in this country is a thoroughly neglected field of study, despite its great influence upon our cultural identity. When historians finally examine the last few decades of the movement, they will get little help from public libraries.

The field of historical recordings has thus far found little support in academia, partly, I believe, because of the low estimation accorded it in the "cognitive domain." Cathleen Flanagan lists 75 members of ACRL, including most major institutions, who report no historical sound collections whatever.<sup>6</sup> There is, then, room for vast improvement in archival coverage in academic libraries. The public library, large or small, that wanted to develop some modest archival capability would not labor in the shadow of a large and competitive antiquarian business. There is, to be sure, much commercial and academic activity coupled with the usual high prices, major donations, and competition, but in comparison with the manuscript and print areas this is a small and very thinly cultivated field.

### Ignoring the record collection

The librarian who seeks to inject a bit of archival awareness into collection and preservation policies should naturally turn to the archivists for advice--but librarians and archivists tend to be much more aware of the differences between their chosen callings than of the potential benefits in sharing methodologies. This is all too true of the various custodians of print, but it is most true in the area of sound recordings. Most librarians have at least learned to worry about the condition of their 8mm films and to avoid exploding film canisters, and library slide collections, when they exist, seem to be tended by media activists who care. However, most media specialists choose to devote themselves to promoting the cause of visual communications. For example, that estimable manifesto for consciousness-raising, Deirdre Boyle's anthology *Expanding Media*,<sup>7</sup> all but ignores the place of recordings in the nonprint revolution.

After all, recordings have been around almost as long as books, at least from the perspective of the modern library: "One year after the founding of the A.L.A., Thomas A. Edison invited a small mechanical device that captured, stored, and reproduced the sounds of the human voice."<sup>8</sup> Records crept into public libraries not long after they had made their way into private homes on a commercial scale. Many libraries

have had considerable collections of recordings for over a half-century. How these collections have been shaped and maintained is the sore point; but the mere fact that they have been around so long seems to have taken the edge off their appeal as a revolutionary media cause.

Long acquaintance with discs did not prevent one eminent library from irreparably damaging several thousand of the records in its collection by enclosing discs in expensive, individual plastic sleeves that left gummy deposits on the grooves they were designed to protect. The same institution has a large collection of recordings, gathered for archival purposes, which is isolated and virtually unusable because funds are not available to prepare it for scholarly use. And this situation is hardly unique; the following was reported in 1972, but is still painfully accurate:

Even in large library systems, collections of fragile phonograph records and tapes are often piled in basements and attics, exposed to the ravages of rodents and thieves, and subject to extremes of heat and humidity. In many cases, the material had not been removed from the original boxes in which it was stored when donated and delivered to the library. For this reason many private collectors are becoming increasingly disenchanted with the library's ability to preserve and provide access to sound recordings.<sup>9</sup>

#### Wasting a resource: the private collector

The particular shame of this state of affairs, apart from the colossal loss of a cultural heritage that it represents, is the waste of a resource every archivist knows is of paramount importance: the private collector. The same devoted creature who assists the library in divesting itself of valuable possessions on sale day can be of enormous value as a consultant and especially as a donor. Many collectors who expect their names to appear soon on the Celestial Inventory would be eager to see the results of their private passion come to some public good.

Most manuscript and rare book special collections in the major research libraries in this country would be either nonexistent or disastrously diminished without the active and often expert support of the private collector. A recent study of six of the important American sound archives (at Yale, UNH, Syracuse, Stanford, and New York's Lincoln Center) reveals the absolutely decisive influence of private record and tape collectors--often as founders, always as active givers, shapers, and consultants.<sup>10</sup> These are, for the most part, people not motivated by death or taxes, but by a love of music and its recorded expression.

A number of record devotees have made the sound archives their vocation. Perhaps the best known example is David Hall, director of the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives, who as a young man created one of the most significant early discographic and evaluative reference tools in the various editions of *The Record Book*.<sup>11</sup> The Association for Recorded Sound

Collections (which, with its ARSC Journal and its many discographic and educational projects, is the most vital focal point of professional sound archives activity<sup>12</sup>) derives much of its quality from the energy and commitment of private collectors.

David Hall has estimated that there may be some 15,000 public and private historical sound collections in the Western Hemisphere, and a good many of the private collections find their way in part or whole into the better public collections.<sup>13</sup> However, the number of good public sound archives is really very small, and apart from the Library of Congress, the coverage is intensive and specialized rather than comprehensive.

Were librarians to cultivate local collectors and general enthusiasts with the same skill displayed by many archivists, the prospect of coming to grips with sound recordings would not be so grim. For every one of the 15,000 or so historical collections included in Hall's estimate, there are dozens of smaller, more haphazard, but nonetheless archival collections maintained by knowledgeable music lovers. Liaisons with even a small fraction of this population could bring the public library an abundance of good, free advice and even free records.

Very few collections are important enough to attract the attention of the major sound archives, very few collectors have the knowledge (or pretension) to establish connections with these archives, and in the tenuous, highly localized antiquarian and secondhand record market there are few opportunities for the small collector to sell holdings for any real economic benefit. With the exception of certain categories--rare early vocal recordings and rare early sound tracks, for instance--it's a dealer's market. Stories of large personal collections of out-of-print recordings sold to dealers for twenty-five cents to a dollar a disc are common.

Much of the waste, and much of the opportunity, lie not only in lost gifts but in proper appreciation of what is already in the library collection. Here too the consulting collector can be of great help, if only to steer the librarian in the direction of dealers' retail catalogs and useful discographies.

#### Bibliographic sources for recordings

The most obvious contrast between sound and print collecting is in the realm of bibliographic control. (Print here includes music in print also.) Existing controls are directed principally at the current, commercial side of the sound recording business (the Schwann catalogues, most famously), or they cater to the collector rather than to the scholar. The Schwann publications--in particular, the Schwann--Records, Tapes guide--exercise a virtual monopoly in this country in the area of quick-reference, current indexing.<sup>14</sup> Despite the existence of other well-established indexing services (such as Phonolog), Schwann has a universally acknowledged right to its claim of being the "World's Most Consulted

Guide to Recorded Music." Despite this preeminence, the Schwann catalog, noble and beloved as it is, is a sloppy, often inaccurate, rather badly constructed little mag, with almost random selection and thoroughly inadequate coverage of the current record market. It is surely a grand bargain and performs the quick reference function well enough to be indispensable, but were it to contend with the quality of BIP or a Wilson index, it would be laughed off the market, or at least relegated to those who couldn't afford more than a buck-and-a-quarter a month for record indexing.

There are a great many discographies available, mostly specialized and of variable quality--see the first volume of the Bibliography of Discographies<sup>15</sup>--the products, again, of private enthusiasms. Discography as a discipline is, politely put, "in its formative stage."<sup>16</sup> In his recent survey of the field, Michael Gray, editor of the ARSC Journal and co-compiler of the Bibliography of Discographies, concluded:

Discography is still plagued by the fact that it is an informal calling, with practitioners making up their own rules as they go along. That outstanding work still emerges from this situation is a tribute to the standards which some discographers set for themselves. And if discography cannot claim the right to be considered along with bibliography, it may be because the aids and services upon which bibliography is built do not exist in discography.<sup>17</sup>

The lack of bibliographic aids no doubt contributes to the reluctance of libraries to venture beyond selecting recordings. While there is no Choice or Booklist designed specifically for librarians in this field, there are good tools for current selection, such as Kurtz Myers' "Index to Recorded Reviews," which is a regular feature of Notes, and the recent ALA guide by Richard Halsey, Classical Music Recordings for Home and Library,<sup>18</sup> an intelligent and important attempt to give the uninitiated librarian (and others as well) some relatively quick, usable sense of classical repertoire. An indication of the "formative" condition of this field can be found in Halsey's introduction, which presents a very basic defense of the music recording and confronts such primitive issues as recording "predictability" (it emits the same pattern of sounds each time it is played). If librarians are still objecting to records on this level, it is little wonder that they are not eager to come to grips with them in more complex ways.

#### Misunderstandings about record wear

On a more basic level, collectors often have a more realistic sense of the effects of wear and abuse on recordings; veteran collectors perforce develop the ability to gauge the usability of an old disc by visual inspection. Although levels of tolerance depend upon specific endurance and care, it is generally true that librarians entrusted with weeding know little about the effects of wear. This assertion is based upon more than undigested bitterness (I found another copy of my incineration

victim anyway--a library discard, of course). It is received wisdom that records wear out in ways that books do not. Aside from the propensities of many patrons for storing records on hot radiators or playing them with cactus needles, there remains the necessity of retrieving sound from the record by means of the physical contact of a stylus with a record groove, and physical contact means physical wear.

The problem with this received wisdom--as with much received wisdom in a field so profoundly influenced by changing technology--is that it is wrong, or at least not very right. It is only recently that serious examinations of groove wear have been made in any systematic way with adequate equipment, the scanning electron microscope. The results are not all in, and they will no doubt be controversial anyway, but some of the conclusions reached in the process of magnifying the groove wall ten thousandfold seem to confirm the suspicions of record loyalists.

In the process of studying discs by means of the scanning electron microscope, Stanton Magnetics engineer George Alexandrovich examined a record that had been used in life-testing an automatic turntable shutoff mechanism. A portion of this record had been played, without special precautions or cleaning agents, 80,000 times in succession:

We rushed to listen to it and, to our amazement, it actually sounded better than some of our less-played records. Looking at the groove under the SEM, we could see that the stylus had produced a "footprint" on the groove walls that conformed to the shape of the stylus tip, and it seemed that once a certain amount of wear had occurred, no further damage to the groove took place.... Phonograph records, contrary to our fears, are unusually tough and durable; in general, they are the most "forgiving" sound storage medium we know of.<sup>19</sup>

Compare this statement of scientific findings with the following widely-held opinion, pronounced in 1961 by Harold Spivacke in Carol June Bradley's Reader in Music Librarianship:

We know that the disc whether made of a shellac compound or of the more recent vinylite compounds is capable of only a limited number of playings. Even if we accept as a fact the figure 300, which some people allege is possible, we must remember that the loss in fidelity after a few playings, may, under certain circumstances, become quite noticeable.<sup>20</sup>

Alexandrovich's stylus tracked at 1.5 grams, standard these days, and a good deal lighter than tracking forces that Spivacke would have known in 1961, but not so much lighter that the difference between the estimated 300 and 80,000 playings ceases to be suggestive.

#### Cultural consciousness raising

Archival awareness may be an unreasonable or even elitist expectation



for the modern public library, beset as it is with prospects of zero growth, zero money, and zero-based budgeting. But in an era in which the library has to struggle ever harder for the attention and support of a distracted public, an active commitment to historical consciousness might inspire a healthy dose of the same on the part of that public. This is hardly a time when the library, still the most visible custodian of culture, can afford to turn its back on one vital means of preserving that culture.

The field of sound recordings is very probably our biggest cultural business in a commercial sense, but in terms of any broader and deeper awareness of its place in our culture, it is badly undercultivated. What suffers is not merely our archives, but our aural understanding of our heritage as a whole. At the opening of the Berkshire Music Center in 1979, Tanglewood Director Gunther Schuller made a brave and noble speech in which he told the students that "this beautiful thing called an orchestra" was in trouble:

Apathy, cynicism, hatred of new music, are rife and abound on all sides. Unbelievably, we have developed the art of reading pitches...to such a high level of technical competence that we are in imminent danger of no longer needing our ears. ...We do it all with out eyes, whilst our ears gradually atrophy from disuse. We have accomplished the ultimate musical ingenuity (or is it indignity): we have learned to transform musical performing into a reading, visual skill, eliminating the very thing for which music exists: hearing, aural perception and aural sensitivity.<sup>21</sup>

Schuller was not speaking of sound archives, of course, but the danger that he eloquently described does sound unsettlingly like what seems, in effect, to be the actual goal of many librarians: If we trade all our other capacities for reading skills, we will ultimately remove the responsibility for change from the public library.

John Swan

1. Quoted by Joseph Palmer, "Eight Millimeter Circulation Policies and Ranganathan's First Law" in *Expanding Media*, Deirdre Boyle, ed. (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1977), p. 149.
2. Vincent H. Duckles, "The Place of Gramophone Recordings in a University Music Library" in *Reader in Music Librarianship*, Carol June Bradley, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Indian Head, 1973), p. 267.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Michael Ochs, "A Taxonomy of Qualifications for Music Librarianship: The Cognitive Domain," *Notes*, Vol. 33, No. 1, Sept. 1976, p. 27-44.

5. Edward E. Colby, "Sound Scholarship: Scope, Purpose, Function and Potential of Phonorecord Libraries," *Library Trends*, July 1972, p. 11.
6. Cathleen Coyla Flanagan, *Sound Recordings, Private Collectors, and Academic Libraries* (Urbana-Champaign: U. of Illinois Ph.D. Dissertation; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1976).
7. Deirdre Boyle, ed., *Expanding Media*, op. cit.
8. Gordon Stevenson, "Recording, Sound," *The ALA Yearbook 1978* (Chicago: ALA, 1978), p. 257.
9. Carlos B. Hagen, "The Struggle of Sound Archives in the United States," *Library Trends*, July 1972, p. 30.
10. Flanagan, op. cit., Appendix.
11. David Hall, *The Record Book*. (New York: Smith and Durrell, 1940-48).
12. Gordon Stevenson, "Recording, Sound," *The ALA Yearbook 1977* (Chicago: ALA, 1977), p. 275.
13. Stevenson, *ALA Yearbook 1978*, op. cit., p. 258.
14. Schwann-I, *Records, Tapes*. Boston: Monthly, now in vol. 31.
15. Michael Gray and Gerald Gibson, *Bibliography of Discographies* (New York: Bowker, 1977).
16. Michael Gray, "Discography: Its Prospects and Problems," *Notes*, Vol. 35, No. 3, March 1979, p. 578.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 592.
18. Richard Sweeney Halsey, *Classical Music Recordings for Home and Library* (Chicago: ALA, 1976).
19. George Alexandrovich, "Keeping it Clean: Record Hygiene," *Stereo Review*, Vol. 42, No. 6, June 1979, p. 81.
20. Harold Spivacke, "The Preservation and Reference Services of Sound Recordings in a Research Library," in *Bradley, Reader*, p. 262.
21. Major portion of speech quoted in Richard Dyer, "A Musician's Plea: Schuller Asks for Artistic Dedication," *Boston Sunday Globe*, July 22, 1979, pp. 85, 87.