"THE USE OF COMMERCIAL SOUND RECORDINGS IN SCHOLARLY RESEARCH"

by Cathleen C. Flanagan

In 1878 the North American Review published an article by Thomas A. Edison entitled "The Phonograph and Its Future." In the article Edison predicted eleven potential applications for his new invention; these were:

- 1. letter-writing
- 2. dictation
- reading to the ill or blind
- 4. educational applications
- 5. music
- 6. the family record (preserving the last words of the dying)
- 7. phonographic books for the preservation of languages
- 8. musical toys
- 9. clocks
- 10. advertising
- 11. the preservation of speech and other utterances 1

In recent years another application of the phonograph — or, to be more precise, of phonograph recordings — has begun to evolve. This is the use of commercial sound recordings for research purposes, the acceptance of sound recordings, in Goldstein's words, as "a piece of objective data that can be re—examined without change at many levels for many different types of analyses." The following article represents an effort to document the growth of this new trend. Before reporting on the results of the investigation, however, some comments on the scope and focus of the study may be in order.

Sound recordings may generally be divided into two categories: commercial and instantaneous or in-the-field. The role of instantaneous recordings in research is fairly well-established; witness, for example, the boom in oral history studies since 1948 when Allan Nevins established the first oral history research program at Columbia University. The utilization of commercial recordings as research documents, however, is a far more rare occurrence - a situation due at least partly to the lingering conviction in scholarly circles that the phonograph is still primarily a means of mass entertainment. That commercial sound recordings can indeed be successfully and profitably utilized as sources of research data is an argument this study sought to prove.

Secondly, the focus of this study was on the use of a certain type of evidence in research — upon the application of a specific type of research methodology, in other words. Thus the subject matter of the studies cited, while obviously not irrelevant, was of comparably less importance than information about the means by which information was

gathered. While this approach made for a fascinating investigation, it also made for a frustrating one, as traditional subject or discipline-oriented searches could not be effectively employed. Thus this survey should be regarded as a preliminary attempt to focus awareness on the use of commercial sound recordings in research. Perhaps the publication of this compilation will encourage other examples to come to light or future researchers to employ a very worthwhile methodology.

With the above two <u>caveats</u> in mind, research studies utilizing commercial sound recordings have tended to fall into one of three subject areas: speech and theatre, literature, and music.

In theatrical research, one type of study takes as its approach the analysis of voice as a component of a given performer's acting style. Whitlatch, for example, studying the acting style of Ellen Terry, examined three Terry recordings in an effort to identify the nature of the performer's vocal resources. Terry's use of range, volume, articulation, pause, and varieties of emphasis contributed, he concluded, "no small amount to her success as an actress." McKenzie, employing a similar technique, examined elements in the acting style of Joseph Jefferson III, 4 as did Eilenberg in his analysis of the style of Johnston Forbes-Robertson. Taranow, examining the art of Sarah Bernhardt, divided the actress' technique into voice, pantomime, gesture, spectacle, and histrionic theory. Using early cylinder recordings of some of Bernhardt's performances as a means to study the performer's vocal development, Taranow concluded that, while Bernhardt "believed herself to be an emotionalist," her performances were grounded in classical acting techniques (including articulation, breath control, use of the low, middle, and upper registers, and poetic and punctuation shifts). Taranow labels this juxtaposition the "paradox" of Bernhardt's art.6 Bebb, seeking to determine why critics called Sir John Gielgud's performances of Hamlet "legendary," compared recordings made of Gielgud portraying the Prince in six different productions. Through this comparison he concluded that the confidence and familiarity derived from repeated performances of the role gave Gielgud a "greater freedom in handling the verse" and consequently a greater emotional involvement with the character than other actors had been able to establish.

Another type of study deals specifically with the voice of a particular performer. In a companion article to the one previously cited, Bebb examined the characteristics of the Gielgud voice. What makes this actor's voice remarkable, he concluded, is the performer's careful development of technique, his concern for fine speech, and his subtle command of nuance. Himself a professional actor, Bebb has also analyzed the voice of the late nineteenth-century actor, Henry Irving. Theatrical historians have customarily remarked on Irving's peculiar voice and outlandish style of speech; after listening to four fragmentary recordings of Irving reciting Shakespeare and declaiming poetry, Bebb concluded that Irving employed a highly naturalistic delivery familiar to modern ears, but at odds with the prevailing sustained tone Shakespearean style of his day. Nearman compared phonetic

transcriptions made from recordings of John Gielgud, Paul Scofield, and Richard Burton playing $\underbrace{\text{Hamlet}}_{\text{Hamlet}}$ to the descriptions of British stage speech given in standard American acting texts. This comparison led him to conclude that American texts are not accurate in their portrayal of British stage speech – a conclusion that should suggest the need for some immediate textual revisions. 10

The studies commented on thus far have dealt with the vocal resources of one, or at most three, performers. Commercial recordings have also been used, however, to document composite changes in acting styles over the years. Bebb, for example, studied recordings made by a variety of English and American actors from 1906 onwards. In his research, reported in a pair of articles published in Recorded Sound 11,12, he sought to determine whether there was a difference in the extent to which actors in the early part of the century and actors in the present period made use of such acting tricks as timing, chanting or sustained tone, and what he termed "emotional signposting." From the study Bebb concluded that "in each decade of this century, the actor is needing to express overtly less than he did in the previous decade to make a comparable effect." Bebb attributed this situation at least in part to increased sophistication on the part of modern audiences.

A second area in which commercial sound recordings have been profitably used as research documents is in the study of literature. Roberts, for example, examined the role of Afro-American folk and popular music in the fiction of James Baldwin. He found that Baldwin relied upon various aspects of the black folk tradition to characterize, to provide structure, to advance the plot, and to comment on existing social conditions. If Interestingly enough, Roberts also discovered that as Baldwin progressed as a writer towards didacticism and protest fiction he moved away from folk music and towards popular music — a pattern Roberts feels is due to the more obvious social overtones of recorded popular music.

Other researchers have taken as their focus the recorded work of twentieth century poets. Foster used Caedmon recordings of poets Marianne Moore, e. e. cummings, and Dylan Thomas reading their own works to evaluate the interpretive ability of modern poets. Based on the premise that "misconceptions that arise as to the meaning of modern poets and their poetry can be accounted for by the fact that a voice... does not accompany a poem," her study concluded that Moore's "articulatory faults" detracted from her communicative ability, while cummings and Thomas enhanced their materials by responsiveness and the conveying of emotion respectively. 15 Jeffrey, studying the work of poetess Diane Wakoski, found that Wakoski's work reflected a growing concern with the relationship of poetry to orality and music. From this Jeffrey went on to document examples of expressive theory observable in Wakoski's recorded performances of her own works. 16

As might be expected, the greatest concentration of research studies utilizing commercial sound recordings is in the field of music. For

convenience these studies may be grouped into the following categories: folksong and traditional music, country music, blues and jazz, popular music, and classical music.

In the area of traditional music, Raichelson examined the content, structure, and performance/musical characteristics of black religious folksong during three transitional periods in American history: the antebellum period, the period of emancipation and reconstruction, and the trend towards urbanization in the twentieth century. He found that as changes in social factors such as education, class status, or economic standing occur in black society they are accompanied by corresponding changes in the notion of worldview expressed in the songs. Thus he concluded that black religious folksong acts as a reliable symbolic indicator of cultural change within black society. 17 Spottswood, interested in examples of Polish folkmusic from the Tatra mountains, found the foreign language recording series of Victor, Brunswick, Vocalion, Columbia, and others to be a significant resource for the study of rural or village music from other countries. 18 Bolger, attempting to define the sources of the repertoire of the singing Carter family, examined recordings made by various members of the Carter family over a period of years. From this effort she found the Carters' repertoire to be an "eclectic mixture" of traditional (ballads, religious Southern mountain songs) and modern (sentimental songs influenced by late Victorian parlor songs) elements. 19

Several researchers have sought to establish a definition for the term hillbilly music through the examination of recorded examples of hillbilly music. Green studied print sources together with Okeh, Victor, and Columbia recordings for evidence in support of his theory that "the term hillbilly music was born out of the marriage of a commercial industry — phonograph records and some units of show business — with traditional Appalachian folksong." $^{\rm 20}$ Cohen examined the repertoire of a typical hillbilly string band, The Skillet Lickers; after tabulating the floating verses, instrumentation, vocal styles and arrangements, and the extent of traditional versus popular material he found in the Skillet Lickers' repertoire, he concluded that "rural folk music exists in a symbiotic relationship with urban popular music, and frequently the agency for communication between the two is hillbilly music."21 McCulloh, suspicious of the accuracy of hillbilly tune transcriptions used in some academic works on folklore, compared available transcriptions of "You Will Never Miss Your Mother Until She's Gone" with a 1924 recorded original and found some significant variations. 22 Applying Green's earlier claim for the interrelationships of traditional and commercial elements in hillbilly music, Cogswell found three sources of supportive evidence: similarities between recorded lyrics and published traditional collections, the mixture of traditional and commercial elements in the repertory and style of famed performer Jimmie Rodgers, and the case history of recorded and collected variants of the "McKinley" ballad. 23 Finally, the Cohens sampled 280 hillbilly recordings made by eighteen artists between 1922 and 1924 in an effort to determine the derivation of the hillbilly repertoire. Their conclusion - that 59% of the songs derived from the pre-1900 native American folk or minstrel tradition - lends credence to Green's theories on the sources of hillbilly music. 24

In the area of country music, Malone used commercial recordings, print sources, and interviews in his Country Music U.S.A. to provide a general, chronological account of the development of American country music from its commercial founding in the 1920's to its present bigbusiness status."25 In contrast, Danker studied the repertory and performance style of a single country singer - Johnny Cash - in an effort to shed light on "the role of the creative individual both in a traditional culture and context and in one transitional towards the popular."²⁶ Danker's work as based on thirteen years of observing Cash plus analysis of the singer's repertory of over 350 songs through recordings, television performance tapes and films, and song folios. Cohen, chronicling the career of Robert W. Gordon, first archivist of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, documents Gordon's involvement with the famous Vernon Dalhart recording of "The Wreck of the Old 97." Cohen shows, through historical accounts and eighteen recorded versions of the ballad issued prior to 1931, "how the song came to be a million-selling record hit worthy of fifteen years of investigations, lawsuits, and counter-suits." 27

Bluegrass music, a subdivision of country music, has also come in for a share of research interest. Attempting to determine the nature of bluegrass music, Rosenberg studied the instrumentation, vocalization, and repertory of recorded selections identified as bluegrass. From this he concluded that musical selections imitating the style and repertory of Bill Monroe's original 1945-48 band are today considered to be traditional bluegrass performances. Adler, interested in the role of the ballad in bluegrass music, used as the materials of his study 79 longplaying records of bluegrass music containing 850 songs. Defining ballads as "narrative songs which were felt to present a reasonably coherent story," he found, among other things, that "...those ballads which come from traditional sources and survive in the bluegrass idiom retain an amazing correspondence with their oral counterparts." 29

Researchers interested in jazz and blues have made some of the most creative use of commercial sound recordings as research documents. Some have used early commercial recordings as a mirror through which to examine social or cultural attitudes. Otto and Burns, for instance, found that black media advertisements of the period between 1924 and 1941 reflected a distinct yellow-brown-black color hierarchy, with the lightest skin tone (yellow) being viewed as the most socially desirable. From this they went on to examine Afro-American attitudes towards the color hierarchy as expressed in recordings of black bluesmen on Okeh, Victor, Vocalion, and Columbia recordings of the same period. The lyrics examined revealed a distinct concern with and uneasiness over the color hierarchy. Morgan and Tulloss, documenting the "toxocologic tragedy" known as the Jake walk, found references to the affliction on

twelve recordings made by rural artists between 1928 and 1934. (or Jamaica ginger extract) was a medicinal extract widely used in the southeastern United States to circumvent Prohibition. The consumption of one particular batch, illegally altered to render it more potent, caused a reported 20,000 cases of muscle pains, weakness and sensory impairment. Some consumers were left with a peculiar and permanent gait affliction - a condition known as the Jake walk. 31 Foreman, examining jazz and race records made by Negroes between 1920 and 1932, found a transformation in the industry's orientation that corresponded closely to changes in the surrounding society. Prior to 1920, recordings made by Negroes were primarily plantation airs, spirituals, and comic minstrel performances - selections intended for the amusement and entertainment of white buyers. After 1920 and the successful recording debut of blues singer Mamie Smith, a new catalog of Negro popular entertainment, reflecting a new social identity and aimed at a new Negro buyer, developed. 32

Other researchers have examined stylistic and thematic elements in jazz and blues recordings. Shockett analyzed a random sample of 331 blues recordings from the period of 1917 to 1931 in an effort to trace "stylistic trends in the evolution of the blues as practiced by jazz instrumentalists"; from this he developed a list of eight features characterizing the type of composition which became, sometime after 1931, "the prototype of what jazz musicians today consider to be the blues."33 Lieb conducted a close examination of the recorded repertoire of a single performer - classic blues singer Ma Rainey. her study on 92 recordings the singer made between 1923 and 1928, Lieb found that Rainey's art consisted of a merging of the minstrelsy and country blues traditions. 34 In his "Ethnomusicology of Downhome Blues Phonograph Records 1926-30," Titon, like Shockett before him, sought to establish the stylistic coherence of a group of blues recordings, in this case forty downhome blues recordings issued between 1926 and 1930. Titon went further, however, in adding to his investigation a study of the "beliefs and behaviors" of the recording artists, the record industry, and the record audience associated with these recordings.³⁵ Brown, constructing a history of jazz drumming in the United States prior to 1942, found that musical periods in the development of jazz drumming could be differentiated on the basis of features such as style, rhythm and metre, phrasing, and ensemble practice. Brown's analysis was based on recordings of prominent jazz drummers from the Ragtime, 1920's, Swing, and Bop periods of jazz styling. 36

A third group of researchers has sought to examine the relationship between various segments of the blues tradition. Russell, considering the growth of American music from a transatlantic viewpoint in <u>Blacks</u>, <u>Whites</u>, and <u>Blues</u>, used recordings, print sources, and interview data to substantiate his claim that "white country music in America would not have its present form if it were not for black workmanship." Oliver's 1968 study, <u>Aspects of the Blues Tradition</u>, was constructed upon a comparison of commercial recordings and unissued or privately recorded examples of selected blues songs. Oliver's thesis – that active

censorship was applied to recorded blues of sexual content - was amply upheld by his discovery of large amounts of materials present in test pressings and company and private files, but deleted from commercially issued recordings. 38 Evans, studying the compositional techniques of black blues singers, compared his own collection of nearly 1,000 blues recorded live in Mississippi and Louisiana with commercial blues recordings on the Imperial, Arhoolie, and Blue Horizon labels - an effort that led him to conclude that blues display "a stability in tradition" as a result of having been learned by blues singers from commercial recordings. 39 Evans has also been involved in studying the musical and stylistic contrasts inherent in Solk blues (traditional and rural) and popular or commercial blues (original and urban).40 Titon has conducted similar research, exploring the differences between what he terms downhome and big band blues. Downhome blues, Titon found, are characterized by informality, erratic entrances, and a blurred, indistinct style of ensemble playing. Big band blues, on the other hand, are precise, elegant, and harmonically complex — in a word, professional. 41

American popular music has also been studied via commercial sound recordings. The Cohens compared the texts and melodic structures of fourteen professionally written songs of the period of 1860 to 1910 in their first appearance on mass-distributed sheetmusic of the nineteenth century and in their second appearance on "traditional" hillbilly recordings of the 1920's and 1930's. This comparison indicated that popular music undergoes substantial modification when adopted by the oral tradition. 42 Cockrell examined two longplaying albums by the Beatles: Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Eearts Club Band and Abbey Road, Side Two. Finding in these two albums "a certain series of tensions and resolutions which are controlled by the creators to give a sense of direction and unity to the recordings," Cockrell argued that part of the Beatles' uniqueness "lies in this combination of the aural tradition being governed by structures which one associates with art-music tradition."43 On a somewhat less esoteric plane, O'Grady sought to chronicle the development of the Beatles' musical style between 1962 and 1967. His study revealed the fact that the Beatles had followed a musical progression from the simple to the complex in terms of an increase in musical sophistication (the use of melody and harmony) and the expanded use of technical resources (electronic and tape devices). 44 And Tungate made use of print sources and popular recordings of the 1950's to

Before turning to a consideration of research in classical music, it should be noted that several of the titles being issued in the University of Illinois Press Music in American Life series reveal a dependence on commercial recordings as sources of research data. Denisoff's <u>Great Day Comin'</u> combined data from print sources, interviews, and commercial recordings to produce "an objective treatment of the role of Communists in the so-called urban folk music 'movement'."46 Green's <u>Only a Miner</u>, subtitled <u>Studies in recorded coal-mining songs</u>,

attempted "to portray American coal-mining life and reveal miners' values" through case studies of selected songs as they appeared upon commercial recordings between 1925 and 1970. 47 Townsend's San Antonio Rose examined the life and music of country western recording star Bob Wills. 48 Malone and McCulloh's Stars of Country Music used interviews, recordings, and print sources to produce a history of country music from Uncle Dave Macon to Johnny Rodriguez. 49 Titon's ethnomusicological study of downhome blues appeared in the series as Early Downhome Blues: A musical and cultural analysis. 50 Similarly Foreman's dissertation study of jazz and race records between 1920 and 1932 is slated to appear in the series under the title of Awful moanin' blues. 51

In the area of classical music, Colby has succinctly identified some of the directions research utilizing commercial sound recordings may take:

- 1. the history of the career of a major artist qua performer...
- the comparison of performances of the same composition by different performers,
- the analysis of a given style of performance characteristic of a given historical period,
- a living art must put scholarship to practice, i.e., studying styles of singing and playing in order to authentically recreate them,
- 5. (the study of) 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.⁵²

Steame, constructing a critical history of singers and singing from Adelina Patti and Francesco Tamagno to Montserrat Caballe and Sherrill Milnes, focused his analysis upon recorded examples of the performers discussed. 53 King examined tempo variations in recordings of selected Hadyn and Mozart symphonies in an effort to determine "the extent to which a performer should adhere literally to the musical symbols indicated by the composer."54 Finding that conductors such as Beecham, Dorati, Furtwangler, Klemperer, Monteux, Szell, Toscanini, and Walter all made use of tempo variations, King advanced the argument that "artistic performances, among other factors, depend on deviations from metronomical time."55 Hughes, studying the conducting artistry of Arturo Toscanini, analyzed recorded examples of Toscanini's work from 1920 to 1954; he concluded that the "Toscanini legacy" was due in part to the conductor's high performance standards, in part to his "fanatical insistence on the importance of tempo," and in part to Toscanini's perception that "the simple and obvious are, in fact, what was originally intended by the composer."56 Two studies conducted at Stanford one examining pedal techniques in the piano works of Debussy⁵⁷ and the

other dealing with Haydn's musical clocks 58 - exemplify the analysis of historical performance styles as identified by Colby. Althouse, studying the nature of the lieder and ballads of Carl Loewe, examined recorded examples for thematic and stylistic characteristics. 59 and Leupold, seeking to document the "Renaissance in organ composition and playing" that occurred in Paris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, based their analysis of performance styles upon organ rolls and phonograph recordings made by prominent European organists of the time and their students. 60 Mathews, analyzing the role of the cadenza in piano concertos, examined recordings by Schnabel, the Fischers, Mathews, Gieseking, Long, Gilels, Landowska, Casadesus, Malcolm, and Brendel. His research led him to conclude that contemporary performers must exercise great care in performing an extended piano cadenza lest they commit the "double anachronism of a twentieth-century artist playing a decidedly nineteenth-century cadenza in an eighteenthcentury masterpiece."61 Finally, Tardif, seeking to develop a performance guide for Alban Berg's Concerto for Piano, Violin, and 13 Winds, compared the composer's original tempo indications with the tempi of seven extant recordings in order to establish a definitive tempo chart for the work. 62

The above-mentioned studies constitute a significant body of research employing a distinctive research methodology. This compilation should only be considered a beginning, however. Other areas exist in which commercial sound recordings could profitably be used as the documents of research. More might be done with the analysis of the relationship between poetry and orality in recordings of contemporary poetry. Speech researchers might examine patterns and techniques in recordings distributed by the Library of Congress Recordings for the Blind service. as many of these recordings have been produced by noted performers. Theatrical researchers could examine the vocal resources or acting styles of other performers who have made commercial recordings. Students of popular music might examine stylistic and thematic elements in the work of a variety of contemporary recording groups. A particularly interesting study would be the comparison of differences between black-oriented popular recordings of the 1950's and 1960's and whiteoriented "cover" recordings of the same song. Much more could be done with the use of recordings to establish definitive performance guides for contemporary serious compositions. These are but preliminary suggestions; it is the hope of this author that in bringing both documented examples and speculative suggestions together that other researchers will be motivated to make effective use of the vast body of our recorded heritage.

Note 1: Portions of this article appeared in a Ph.D. dissertation entitled "Sound Recordings, Private Collectors, and Academic Research Libraries" submitted to the Graduate School of Library Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in 1976.

Note 2: The author would be interested in receiving information about other studies utilizing commercial sound recordings. If enough other examples are identified, a second compilation may be warranted. Information and examples should be sent to:

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NOTES

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- (2nd enl. ed; New York: Dover Publications, 1969), pp. 13, 12.
- ⁵⁷Arthur R. Tollefson, "Pedal Techniques in the Piano Works of Claude Debussy" (Unpublished D.M.A. Final Project, Stanford University, 1968).
- ⁵⁸George R. Hill, "Haydn's Musical Clocks and Their Implications for Late Eighteenth-Century Performance Practice" (Unpublished senior honors project, Stanford University, 1965).
- ⁵⁹Paul Althouse, "Carl Loewe (1796-1869): Eis Lieder, Ballads, and Their Performance" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1971).
- ⁶⁰Richard C. Burns and Wayne Leupold, "The Use of Recordings in Establishing Performance Practices for 19th/20th Century Organ Music," ARSC Journal 7 (#3, 1976), p. 32.
- 61 Denis Mathews, "Cadenzas in Piano Concertos," Recorded Sound 68 (October, 1977), p. 723.
- 62Paul John Tardif, "Historical and Performance Aspects of Alban Berg's Chamber Concerto for Piano, Violin, and 13 Winds" (Unpublished D.M.A. thesis, Peabody Conservatory of Music, 1976).