

CARL ENGEL AND THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS'S  
FIRST ACQUISITIONS OF RECORDINGS

by James R. Smart

1983 marked the centenary of the birth of Carl Engel, musicologist, writer, editor, composer, one of the founders of the American Musicological Society, and the second Chief of the Music Division, Library of Congress. Engel was the successor of Oscar Sonneck at the Library of Congress and afterwards at G. Schirmer both as President of the company and the editor of its journal, The Musical Quarterly. Few men in the United States reached the heights of musical scholarship as did Carl Engel, and the musical world has this year justly acclaimed his achievements and contributions. But there is one aspect of his career, however, that has not been adequately discussed. It is this--Carl Engel was primarily, one can say solely, responsible for the establishment within the Library of Congress of an archive of sound recordings. As is well known, the Library of Congress presently holds a vast collection of recordings covering the entire history of the recording art and totalling at least 250,000 items and probably in the neighborhood of two million titles.

The staff at LC is frequently asked how this huge collection came about, who initiated the policy of collecting records, and when it was begun. There is nothing dramatic in the story, yet it has its interesting points, and certainly it illustrates the old adage about small beginnings leading to great things. Also it will serve to show how much can be achieved when a great institution like the Library of Congress and a great commercial enterprise like the Victor Talking Machine Company work jointly for the sole purpose of promoting scholarship and in the interests of posterity. There was, of course, opposition to the placing of records in libraries, and in this particular case the opposition must remain shrouded in darkness owing to the absence of any clear documentation.

When Carl Engel came to LC in 1922 as Sonneck's successor, after a five-year hiatus during which Walter Whittelsey served as Chief pro-tem, the Library held a total of one recording: a cylinder made by Professor E.W. Scripture in 1904 of the voice of Kaiser Wilhelm II, which had been donated to the Library of Congress in 1906. But it is doubtful if Engel even knew of the existence of this record because it seems that it had been misplaced and forgotten prior to his arrival. Not until the late 1930s, when Harold Spivacke was Chief of the Music Division, did the cylinder turn up inside an old safe that had once been part of the office equipment of the Librarian of Congress. This discovery led Dr. Spivacke to circulate a plea for help among the staff in searching for other records that may have been

put away in unlikely places and then forgotten. But to this writer's knowledge, no other record was ever discovered. For all intents and purposes, the Library of Congress had no sound recordings in its collections when Engel reported for duty, nor was there any thought by the staff of acquiring them.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that LC could well have begun acquiring records if it had so desired in 1906, the same year that it accepted the Kaiser Wilhelm cylinder. On June 8, 1906 Mr. Horace Pettit of the Victor Talking Machine Company spoke at the hearing then being held in the Congressional Reading Room of the Library of Congress concerning the proposed revision of the current copyright law. He noted:

The copyright proposition (i.e., the use by recording companies of copyrighted music) is a new one which comes up after the Victor Company and some other companies have established their plants and have acted in good faith and put their good money in the enterprise; and, in fact, the Victor Company very carefully inquired into the proposition as to whether or not they were invading any legal copyrights or any rights of copyright holders under the law. It also went so far as to try to register its records in the copyright office here in order to test the question of records made by it in order to protect itself in the ownership of certain particular records, for which it paid to the talent for some as much as a thousand dollars a selection, and which I say it attempted to register here in the copyright office, but registration was refused as not copyrightable matter. [Arguments before the committee on patents of the Senate and the House of Representatives, jointly, on the bills S.6330 and H.R. 19853. . . p.264f, Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1906].

It is interesting to consider what the situation would be today if the Copyright Office had ruled otherwise. But it seems fairly clear that if Librarian Herbert Putnam, who was present at the hearing, had approached Mr. Pettit that very day with the proposal that Victor deposit its records as gifts and thus form an archive of permanent reference value, even though not copyrightable, he would have stood a very good chance of convincing the company of the utility of such a collection. But apparently neither Mr. Putnam, nor Mr. Sonneck, nor any other Library official broached the subject. Thus an opportunity was lost and one can only think, "what might have been."

Now it is 1923. Carl Engel has been at LC for about a year. On February 1 he writes a reference letter to John G. Paine, Legal Department, Victor Talking Machine Company. Engel is answering an inquiry regarding a photograph of a German talking machine. Telling Paine that such a photo has been located, he goes on to say, "I trust you have not forgotten my gentle hint with regard to Victor records for the Library of Congress. Hoping for the pleasure of another, and early, visit from you, I remain . . . ." Obviously Paine had recently been in Washington and in contact with Engel. One wonders if the two men had been acquaintances at some previous period. But the really important aspect of this letter is that it is the first known indication that Carl Engel was beginning to develop a plan for acquiring records for his Division.

The following day Paine writes in reply:

The gentle hint you gave me in regard to Victor records becoming part of the archives of the National Library I have formulated into a specific suggestion which I have turned over to the company that they do actually make available to the Music Division of the Library a record of each of the great voices appearing in our catalogue.

From this letter we learn two interesting facts: First, it is apparent that Engel's hint has fallen upon fertile ground and that John G. Paine will willingly aid him in his goal; second, that Engel did not refer to records in general, but that he must have specifically mentioned records by "great voices." The term "great voices" can only mean great singer's voices. For spoken recordings Engel would probably have said "important voices" or something similar. Besides, Engel was a musician, and it is obvious that it is musical recordings that held interest for him and that would have been most useful in the service his division offered to visiting scholars. But why only great voices, why not great pianists and great violinists? No doubt Engel had these in mind too, but when he made his "gentle hint" he and Paine were probably discussing singers and their recordings. One can readily imagine such a conversation. Enrico Caruso had died the previous August; how easy it is to envision Engel and Paine lamenting this fact and consoling themselves with the knowledge that his recordings would live after him. In fact, Victor had announced plans not only to reissue many earlier published Caruso recordings, but also to bring out for the first time recordings that they had previously withheld. Surely Engel would have found these records important to a research library like LC, not only Caruso's recordings but all those made by the "great voices." And what company at that time had more great voices than any other? Victor of course. Thus the gentle hint.

But wheels turn slowly. Nothing resulted from Paine's specific suggestion during the remainder of 1923 and well into 1924. On June 6, 1924, sixteen months after the "gentle hint" letter, Engel again writes to Paine (employing a delightful Germanic compound noun):

I hope to avail myself before long of a chance to inspect your wonder-plant and enjoy some of your most recent recordings. As to the gift of some of these recordings to the Library, I understand Mrs. Clarke to say some months ago, that your directors had given the matter their appropriate thought and would direct the selection of 300 records, to be presented to the Library together with a cabinet to hold them. Mrs. Clarke picked the place for the cabinet in our office.

Whatever the "appropriate" thought was that the directors of the Victor Company gave to the proposal, and despite Mrs. Clarke's unilateral decision about exactly where the record storage cabinet was to be placed, no action was taken. On October 3, 1924 Paine writes to Engel:

The Company is doing some very splendid things in the way of recorded music at the present time and the things which we know would be of great interest to you. You have promised us a visit for a long time, and we do not see why it should not be now as well as later. We sincerely hope that you will favor us with a visit shortly and thus establish an entente cordiale between this Company and your Division, which we have always felt would result to the great benefit of both sides.

Why Engel was delaying his visit to the wonder-plant in Camden is not known; but apparently something seems to have gone wrong somewhere in the negotiations, either at LC or at Victor. Was it that some persons were not in favor of records in the Library of Congress or that such a donation would be poor business practice and the setting of a bad precedent? Some evidence that something of this nature had indeed arisen can be read into the fact that on October 6 Engel writes a letter to Paine in which he refers to Paine's "confidential" letter of October 3, obviously different from the one from which the above quote was made. Engel says he is making an equally confidential reply to it by hand (and apparently not on LC stationery). No trace of these confidential

letters has been found. And so passed away 1924.

Finally, on April 3, 1925 Paine wrote jubilantly to Engel:

Confirming the writer's telephone conversation of yesterday we are happy to inform you that the Company has passed a resolution presenting to the Library of Congress a Victrola and a library of records, the records to be chosen by your good self. We are sending you, therefore, a catalogue of Victor records with the request that you check recordings as you desire. We want you to feel free to order as many records as you wish.

We are writing today to Mr. Herbert Putnam, Librarian, telling him of the gift.

We shall very shortly have the instrument shipped to the Library in your care.

We are also willing, if you wish, to present to the Library some of the old recordings of famous voices, which can be put away into the permanent archives of the Library for the enlightenment (sic) of future generations.

This very interesting letter places in bold relief the most cordial relations that had grown up between Engel and Paine, and, indeed, between LC and Victor. Every wish of Engel's had either already been granted or would be granted as soon as he expressed it. The proposed 300-record library had been canceled, and in its place Engel could have as many as he wished. Engel could himself dictate what records the Library desired. Out-of-print recordings could be specially requested, and the Victor Company would provide them. In addition, the Library would not even have to purchase a Victrola, for the Company was going to provide that too. Engel had every reason to be happy with this splendid largess.

Carl Engel's reply to Paine, written on April 4, is enlightening:

Your very kind telephone message and letter of April 3rd have been most gratifying. In having so earnestly wished for just what your Company's generous gift is now making possible, I have been moved especially by the thought of coming generations. To them this extension of the resources of the Music Division--adding to the printed record of a composition the record of its sound in performance--

will be invaluable.

With my pleasure and satisfaction there mingles only the regret that this wonderful invention was not made three hundred years ago.

Certainly there can be no doubt that Engel had an appreciation of the value of sound recordings that was unusual in its day. Also, the above letter shows that Engel had advanced beyond the "great voices" of the gentle hint. Now he speaks, not of great voices nor even of great performances, but of simply the opportunity records can provide of adding to the printed score the sound of the music itself.

It is assumed that Victor sent to Engel a copy of the 1925 general catalogue and supplements from which to make his selections. If so, the material was apparently sent back to Victor and, since no acquisitions list can now be located, no sure way exists of knowing exactly what records made up this first gift. The Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress for fiscal year 1925, ending June 30 of that year, indicates that a total of 412 records had been received together with an electrically driven Art-Victrola. Some indication of Engel's selection policy can be found in his letter to Paine of April 9:

I have gone over the catalogue and monthly bulletins you sent me. I have checked the records we should be happy to have. They are marked in red pencil for the white part of the catalogue and for the bulletins; in blue pencil for the pink pages listing the "Red Seal Records." Check marks in the latter are only few in number and constitute merely additional material, since the "red seals" are also listed in the main catalogue, and have there been checked by me--perhaps more liberally than modesty requires. But the temptation you so generally [sic] placed before me proved too strong.

The total number of records I have checked is within one or two of a round four hundred. If you should feel inclined to increase your gift beyond this number, I would plead that you include a fair representation of the various samples of national and folk music of other nations (which are not listed in the main catalogue). I have taken the liberty of indicating which nations we would be especially interested in. . . .

I believe you spoke of some records that are no longer on the market. Is there a list available? Have you records of Tamagno and Patti? I miss one of the finest "Jazz" records that I know--a superb example of clever orchestration. It is called "When Buddah Smiles" and was made by the Whiteman band. Is it still available?

So the first list included not only "Red Seals" but examples of jazz and other popular music, plus some recordings of national and folk music of other nations. Presumably the folk music of this nation was covered by what Engel found in the white pages of the catalog. That Engel was not in the ranks of musicians who condemned jazz during the 1920s is interesting, but one wonders if the records made by Paul Whiteman and his orchestra and other big bands of the day formed the extent of his knowledge.

It appears that the hard-fought-for gift was considered both by the Library and by Victor as a one-time event and that no provision had been made for continuations. The 1926 Annual Report did not mention acquisition of records nor is there any correspondence in the present files referring to such a gift. The next move, after a two year hiatus, seems to have been initiated by Victor. John G. Paine had been transferred to another position. On June 22, 1927 Carl Engel answers a now-missing letter from C.B. Gilbert, District Sales Manager, Victor Talking Machine Company:

I very much appreciate your letter of June 17 as a further sign of the interest taken by your Company in the work of our Music Division. I know the Librarian of Congress--now absent in Europe--will be very glad to learn of your Company's generous intention of substituting an "Orthoponic [sic] Victrola" for the model now in the Library, and of adding about one hundred records to those now kept for reference use in the division. . . .

It is my aim to build up, for reference use in years to come, a representative collection of Typical records. Therefore I am very much delighted with the prospect of seeing the Library's equipment so materially strengthened and enlarged.

It was probably the advent of electrical recording in 1925 that led Victor to add to their records already in the Library of Congress. The 1925 gift had, in view of its date, been entirely of recordings made by the acoustic process. Now Victor desired to place its newer and sonically better records in the National Library and to provide a newer and better playback machine as well. But on this occasion, Victor had itself decided what records would make up the gift. Engel, in his letter of June 22, had suggested that once again the Company give him the option of selection. To this, Gilbert replied on June 23:

Regarding records, I feel that it would be better to have the list we are preparing shipped to you. To meet your viewpoint in the matter we will send you a catalog of Orthophonic recordings, with supplements, providing you with a full list of available records. If you will check against these catalogs the records we are sending and at your leisure prepare a list of such other standard and classical recordings that you feel would be of advantage to you in your work, we will be only too glad to give consideration to making shipment of these additional records.

This arrangement pleased Engel, naturally, and he wrote on June 25:

I have just read your letter of June 23rd, and a more splendid liberality than that which you express, in behalf of the Victor Talking Machine Co., I can not well imagine. The proposed exchange of machines and the further gift of records, in the light of your letter, will be most welcome.

Although the end of the fiscal year was only five days after the date of the above letter, the Annual Report for 1927 states as a gift from Victor "over a hundred double-face discs of the new electric recordings" and an Orthophonic Victrola, even though the latter was not a gift, but presented on indefinite loan. Engel was extremely happy with this fine instrument and later wrote, "what it does in the way of tone reproduction borders on the miraculous."

Although no written evidence can be located, matters had apparently reached the point where Victor was offering to make annual contributions to LC. Carl Engel was urged to make requests at any time and on September 30, 1927 he writes again to Gilbert:



You may rest assured that you will not find me backward (in asking for records). As a matter of fact, I should like to ask you right now for the records of the Schumann piano quintet (new recordings 6462-3, I believe), made by the Flonzaley and Gabilowitch. Records of chamber music are especially welcome.

Victor's response came from Mr. W. W. Early, Department of Sales and Merchandise. In it he makes an unfortunate assumption, one not corrected by Engel, and one which we regret today. Early writes on October 10:

Records 6462 and 6463, of the Schumann [sic] Piano Quintet were made by the old process of recording. As this is the case, we feel sure you will not be interested in these.

He added that the company expected to re-record the work electrically in the near future and would be only too glad to send in the new recording when available. So it is evident that the Library lost some valuable recordings simply because they were made by the acoustic process even though most of them found their way into the collections at a later date from other sources.

As should be clear by 1927 a precedent had been firmly established: Victor would offer to the Library of Congress on a continuing basis selections from its new publications. These selections would be made by the Library staff (Engel and his assistants) with Victor occasionally dispatching recordings that it felt represented the company's best work. To enable Engel to make his selections, Victor forwarded to him, as soon as they were printed, monthly supplements to the general catalog. Sometimes Engel's selections would be typed up into easily readable lists, which were sent to the Company while the supplement was retained. Thus today we can find a number of these marked supplements in the files. From them we can obtain glimpses of what specifically was being asked for. We find that the emphasis was, naturally, on Red Seal records with a scattering of black-label discs. It is estimated that almost all new Red Seals were acquired. We can also learn through the letters Engel would write to the company about recordings wanted for the Library but not found in Victor's catalogs. For instance, on November 16, 1928 he wrote to Victor: "Have you issued a record of a number from the show 'Luckee Girl', which is called 'Come, let's make whoopee'?" Victor apparently had not.

And finally we can see what records were being passed over by Engel but which we wish he had selected. We are, of course, viewing this selection process with hindsight, always more accurate than foresight, so we are not in any way faulting Mr. Engel for what was passed over. We only cite a few examples here for historical accuracy. On April 27, 1928 the selector passed over Ben Pollack's Waitin for Katie/Memphis blues; the Rhythm Boys' From Monday On/What price lyrics and recordings by Frank Crumit and Waring's Pennsylvanians. On June 1, 1928 Ohmen and Arden's recording of selections from Funny Face was omitted as was Roy Smeck's Itchin' fingers. On August 31, 1928 Doing things/Wildcat by Joe Venuti and Eddie Lang; Presidential election by Amos 'n' Andy; and Gene Austin's outstanding recording of Jeannine were all passed over. And so it went. Looking through the collection of supplements used by Engel and possibly others in the selection of records for acquisitions can be a rather painful experience.

With the establishment of the Archive of American Folksong in the Music Division in 1928, it is most likely that Robert W. Gordon became influential in the selection of folk and country-music recordings. On the other hand, we know that Engel himself had an appreciation of folk music from his letter to Paine of April 9, 1925, which was quoted above.

Among the unrequested records that the Victor Company sent to the Library of Congress, records that represented what they felt to be particularly successful, items we can point out Gene Austin's My blue heaven, albums M-21 and M-23, an album of Victor Herbert melodies, and Jimmie Rodgers' Blue yodel. Concerning this last named, Mr. Early wrote to Engel on April 24, 1928:

This record was released by us a month ago in the southern section of the country and met with instantaneous success. It has since proved to be one of our very best sellers.

We thought you would be interested in hearing the type of music people are clamoring for today.

Early's letter does not name the artist for this recording of Blue yodel. For two other records that the company sent, Early writes:

As these are good examples of current interpretation of popular ballads, I feel you will be interested in hearing them. You will notice that the present method of treatment is much different than that in vogue five or six years ago.

The recordings in question were Austin's My blue heaven and "another popular selection made by the Revelers."

Engel accepted these offerings in the spirit in which they were made, although he did at least once ask Early to allow the Library to be more active in the selection of popular and novelty recordings. One set of such records, however, he did question. On October 14, 1927 Engel wrote to Early saying that upon opening one of the shipping boxes he found recordings of Since Henry Ford apologized to me, Zulu wail, Cohen at the telephone, Blue river, Slow river, "and sundry other delectable bits of melody."

Early replied:

Your letter of October 14th . . . would indicate that we have a practical joker in our midst. Such is not the case, for these records were undoubtedly sent to you in error and we would appreciate it if you will return them to us, collect.

As it turned out, however, Engel decided to retain some of the recordings. It is not known which ones; still he returned only a few.

From 1927 through the close of Carl Engel's leadership of the Music Division in early 1934, Victor continued to give newly published records to the Library each year. Sometimes the yearly gifts were totalled up for inclusion in the annual report, and we learn that for fiscal year 1929 LC received 283 records, the largest number since the 1925 gift. But for 1931 no report was given, and for 1930 the annual report states that the Library had received from RCA Victor "a continued and generous supply of its latest and best recordings." We can be quite sure that by the time Engel left the Library, the collection had reached at least 1,500 records, nearly all of them selected by Engel himself or, during his absences, by Walter Whittelsey.

During these years, Victor twice changed the playback machine it was providing the Library. As already mentioned, in 1927 the Art-Victrola was removed and a new Orthophonic model installed. Then in 1930 or early 1931 (there is a discrepancy in the evidence) the Orthophonic was removed and replaced with a Radio-Electrola. This machine offered an interesting new dimension to the Music Division's services because it included a disc home-recording attachment. To what specific use Engel put the new feature is unknown, but on January 5, 1931 he wrote to Victor requesting a supply of blank recording discs and some reproducing needles. This presents us with an interesting puzzle. No home recordings have

come to light in the Library's collections that can be traced to Engel. There are some home recordings made inside the Library in the very early 1930s, recordings produced by the curator of the Archive of American Folk Song, Robert W. Gordon. But Dr. Gordon made his recordings on blank aluminum Remsen and Fairchild discs, not on the distinctive RCA Victor blanks.

Relations between the Library of Congress and Victor remained thoroughly cordial all through Engel's years. When the company was purchased by the Radio Corporation of America in 1929, little or no change can be noticed in the established policy of donations. The only jarring note in the relationship seems to have occurred in the year 1932, a year that saw the nadir of Victor's fortunes. Beset by the immense competition of radio and sound motion pictures and, chiefly, by the terrible economic depression into which the nation had sunk, officials at Victor were on edge as they watched the assets of their once financially secure company dwindle to almost nothing. Walter Whittelsey was the innocent catalyst for a little outburst of temper. On January 8, 1932 he wrote the company requesting a recording of selections from the musical The Cat and the Fiddle. He received a reply from L. C. Forman, Record Service, RCA Victor Company, Inc. After reporting that the work requested was published on records 22869 and 22870 recorded by Leo Reisman and his orchestra, and that a medley of selections from the show was available on long-playing record L-16005, Mr. Forman continued petulantly:

As you will doubtless recall, it was the understanding that we would supply the Library with records of historical or unusual interest. As the above records would hardly come in these categories, we do not believe that you would expect them under the arrangement now in effect. We are confident that any of the Washington dealers would be very glad to demonstrate or supply these records at your convenience.

In other words, if you want these records go out and buy them. We do not know if that was what Mr. Whittelsey did, but a new copy of L-16005 can be found in the Library's collections. At any rate, such a pointed refusal was certainly an exception and, in fact, this is the only one we can point out.

To what use did the Music Division put these Victor records? Engel did not want them solely for archival purposes although certainly that figured largely in his plans. There is little concrete evidence now, but some light can be shed on the darkness. On January 31, 1928 Engel wrote to Early:

I wonder if in your generosity you would not possibly send us a little box of tungsten needles. The handsome machine is being put to quite a little use and is giving us a great deal of pleasure. Dr. (Edmund) Fellowes used it in November at his three lectures on Elizabethan music; we had the machine play at a meeting of the Learned Societies in December; and it has provided entertainment at two meetings of the American Library Association. On two occasions some of our readers were able to settle questions of tempo and interpretation by referring to the records. So you see that machine and records are being used (not abused) in just the way they are intended to serve in a place like ours.

To close this essay, we include a brief statement Engel wrote for inclusion in the Librarian's annual report for 1925, for it is a summation of his ideas about the purpose and significance of the collection:

Machine and records are for reference only. Their preservation therefore is reasonably certain. Thus they will be available to the investigator of years to come, when audible witness may be called upon to bear out the printed page or make heard certain peculiarities of a musical medium or rendition which the printed page is unable to retain and which are bound to be lost in the passage of time. The rejoicing in so valuable an adjunct to the durable recording of musical performance is necessarily accompanied by the regret that the phonograph, and its perfected descendants, can not claim a lineage dating back several centuries.

The great flood of records that began flowing into the Library of Congress in the second half of the 1930s was, for the most part, the result of the labors of Harold Spivacke. But let it not be forgotten that the groundwork was laid, the precedent set, by Dr. Carl Engel; without his activities there may well not have been a record acquisition policy with which Dr. Spivacke could work. Of course, even Engel's desires would have been thwarted if not for the sympathetic cooperation of some of Victor's officials, notably John G. Paine. They have the thanks, somewhat belatedly, of many people.