

# PHONOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTERS: MAPPING TRANSNATIONAL CULTURES OF SOUND, 1890–1945<sup>1</sup>

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The book *Phonographic Encounters: Mapping Transnational Cultures of Sound, 1890–1945* contains 12 chapters (framed by an introduction and a conclusion penned by editors Roy and Moreda Rodríguez respectively) dedicated to the exploration of protagonists, spaces and places beyond the main narrative on the major inventors, labels and performers explored in the histories of early recording industry thus far. The contributions were originally presented at the conference *Early Sound Recording Technologies: Transnational Practices, History and Heritage*, held at the University of Glasgow in June 2018 (Moreda Rodríguez, p. 262). The collection does not follow any obvious unifying or universal aims or narrative linearity. The result of such an approach is an exploration of ways in which phonography and the music industry took root in social, cultural and political contexts as diverse as: the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century China, tsarist Russia, World War II Germany or the Little Italy in Philadelphia, US in the first decades of the 20th century. These circumstances brought forward, among others, the roles of record engineers, record retailers, window dressers, founders and members of record clubs. Here, phonography is understood as “a dynamic and multivalent socio-material practice of recording, collecting, retrieving and passing on sound – involving a vast variety of intermediaries, materials, machines and localities” (Roy, p. 1).

1 Writing of this review was supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia, Grant no. 7750287, project *Applied Musicology and Ethnomusicology in Serbia: Making a Difference in Contemporary Society – APPMES*. The monograph to be reviewed was chosen due to being aligned with the aims of the work package 2 “Safeguarding of Music as Cultural Heritage: Aspects of Institutionalisation and Technologisation”. This work package deals with discography in Serbia as lasting proof of a technological influence on musical heritage. Both the team behind the book *Phonographic Encounters* and the team working on the project APPMES focus on the mediation between local music practices and recording technologies, on the basis of extensive archival research and fruitful cooperation with amateur record collectors. The first results of the project APPMES were published in the issue no. 32 (2022) of the journal *Musicology*, edited by Dr Danka Lajić Mihajlović, who is also the coordinator of the aforementioned work package.

With such a diversity in topics and approaches, the contributors also came from various disciplines such as musicology, history, sociology of music, popular music studies, sound studies, theory of culture and sound and material culture theory. Even so, the editors and authors operate within common coordinates, resulting in underlying connections between otherwise diverse chapters. Many of them are based on extensive archival research of sound recordings, magazine illustrations, maps, trade journals etc., including nonstandard and informal archives, such as flea markets or second-hand shops. The mere fact of bringing forward such material challenges the dominant, “big” narratives of phonography coming mainly from the Anglo-American, German and French-speaking worlds, while provoking discussions on interrelations between imperialism and colonialism on the one hand, and recording technologies and practices on the other. The meticulous style that authors share emphasizes the focus on microhistories of “phonographic encounters” in a specific time and place, as another way of expanding the top-down narratives inevitably present in the earlier histories of recorded music. Importantly, theoretical concepts that the authors develop by means of their individual studies are always rooted in traces of their subjects’ socio-material practices.

The book is divided in four parts. In the introductory chapter, sound and material culture theorist Elodie A. Roy outlines the main concepts, topics, sources and methods presented in the monograph. Transnational phonography and relational practices of encounters, negotiations and embodied knowledge are given due attention as concepts emphasized in the title of the book.

The first part, “Negotiating geographical and cultural boundaries: Intermediaries, traders and operators” consists of chapters by musicologist Sergio Ospina Romero, sinologist Andreas Steen and historian Henry Reese. Ospina Romero offers a narrative of touring recording scouts and engineers, describing in detail their working processes in the beginning of the 20th century. By offering a bottom-up analysis of the work of recording scouts—i.e. actual people making decisions that eventually contributed to what we know as catalogues of early companies—the author provides a persuasive alternative to the customary accounts on ‘dehumanised’ major labels. In the chapter dealing with the beginnings of the recording industry and phonographic practices in China, Andreas Steen highlights the role of the middleman or Chinese manager, comprador, who served as a mediator between foreign company’s recording scouts and local artists and their traditional practices. Since the scouts lacked knowledge of the Chinese language and culture, Steen notices that middlemen had significant space for agency. The author of the last chapter in this part, Henry Reese, explores the ways in which the phonograph and phonograph demonstrations were used to create distinct settler colonial soundscapes, at the expense of marginalized and silenced indigenous sounds, thus problematizing imperial and colonial undertones of the dawn of the recording industry.

Listening practices are at the core of the second part of the book (“Repertoires, auditory practices and the shaping of new listening identities”) and examined by three

musicologists. First, João Silva takes us to Portugal while exploring constellations of different musical commodities and the ways they interacted with and influenced each other (e.g. librettos, sheet music, discs). Silva carefully chooses theoretical concepts appropriate for the researched materials and focuses on the concept of intermediality. Eva Moreda Rodríguez focuses on the record club *Discòfils* active in Spain in the 1930s, including its repertoire politics and positioning towards Catalan nationalism. She also comments on the rare occurrence of a substantial archive being preserved, because the lack of material is often the reason why certain topics from recorded music history remain undisclosed. Ulrik Volgsten analyses press coverage of various types to follow transformations of listening to recorded music in Sweden, offering their classification in three phases. Volgsten achieves a balancing act between the notion of the mediatisation of music as well as the musicalisation of everyday life, as inextricable, multi-way processes.

In the part titled “Phonography as ideology: The reordering of knowledge and sensibilities”, the authors tackle the various questions regarding the production of acoustic knowledge and discourses around recorded sound and the music industry. Musicologist Karina Zybina traces the beginnings of the Russian music recording business and its development up to the revolutionary year of 1917, based on printed sources. Repertoire politics has also been scrutinised, with interesting insights into the Russification of foreign compositions. Musicologist Benedetta Zucconi inspects a somewhat unexpected pairing of the discourse of Neo-idealistic philosophy prevalent among Italian composers and intellectuals, on the one hand, and the juridical, copyright-related discourse that led to changes in the reception of recorded music in Italy in the 1930s, on the other hand. The author explains the development of ‘phonographic awareness’ by means of detailed analyses of these discourses. The chapter written by historian and theoretician of culture Britta Lange deals with the national-socialist ideology of World War II Germany and the concept of “das Volk” through the construction of forms of political acoustic knowledge. The author closely examines the recordings of Volhynian Germans made in the early 1940s for research purposes and proves their compatibility with the propagandistic goals of the Nazi state.

The commercial aspects of record sales and their entanglement with everyday sensibilities and identity formations are examined in the fourth part of the book (“The social geographies of record-shopping”). Historian J. Martin Vest draws on the inherently multimedia character of phonography by investigating the pioneering activity of window dresser Ellis Hansen. Several aspects are deliberated in this essay: synesthetic aspects of “the aesthetic of arrest”, early engagement of the phonograph industry and its advertisement sector with designs aimed at controlling and constructing the consumers’s sensing habits, as well as standardisation, centralisation and mass production of window displays of the Victor Talking Machine that mirrored production of sound recordings. Musicologist Siel Agugliaro questions the ways in which the phonograph defined the transnational identity of the Italian immigrant

community in Philadelphia in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Exploring the profiles of record sellers, repertoires of Italian recordings and activities in which owners of record shops and artists were entangled, the author sees the phonograph as a tool for the creation of a transnational space in which ties with the homeland exist in a specific capacity. In the last paper, historian and sociologist Thomas Henry draws a geohistorical map of Parisian record retailers and dealers, stating that transformations in commercial practices reflect the status of sound carriers through time, in order to reconstruct this often-neglected aspect of the history of phonography. Henry's study is directly connected to the online mapping project *Disquaires de Paris*, which introduces the idea of multimedia presentation of research and visualisation of knowledge on phonography.

In the conclusion, Moreda Rodríguez reviews the promising potential of digital mapping in future research on phonography and creative engagement with (sound) artefacts of material history. Here, the additional possible threads and areas of early recording history are attended to, serving as a reminder both of the versatility of phonography as a research field, and the extensive archive-oriented approach resulting in context-sensitive microhistories. Certainly, the authors of individual studies gave numerous cues to future researchers on how to tackle similar topics, while staying highly sensitive to local and regional social and material ecologies. While being limited by the context covered, due to its focus and avoidance of global and universal conclusions, the book *Phonographic Encounters* still opens the door for local specificities to be examined in detail and shows how such endeavours could be successfully achieved.

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