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## Belfer Audio Archive: Our Cultural Heritage in Sound

John Harvith  
*Syracuse University*

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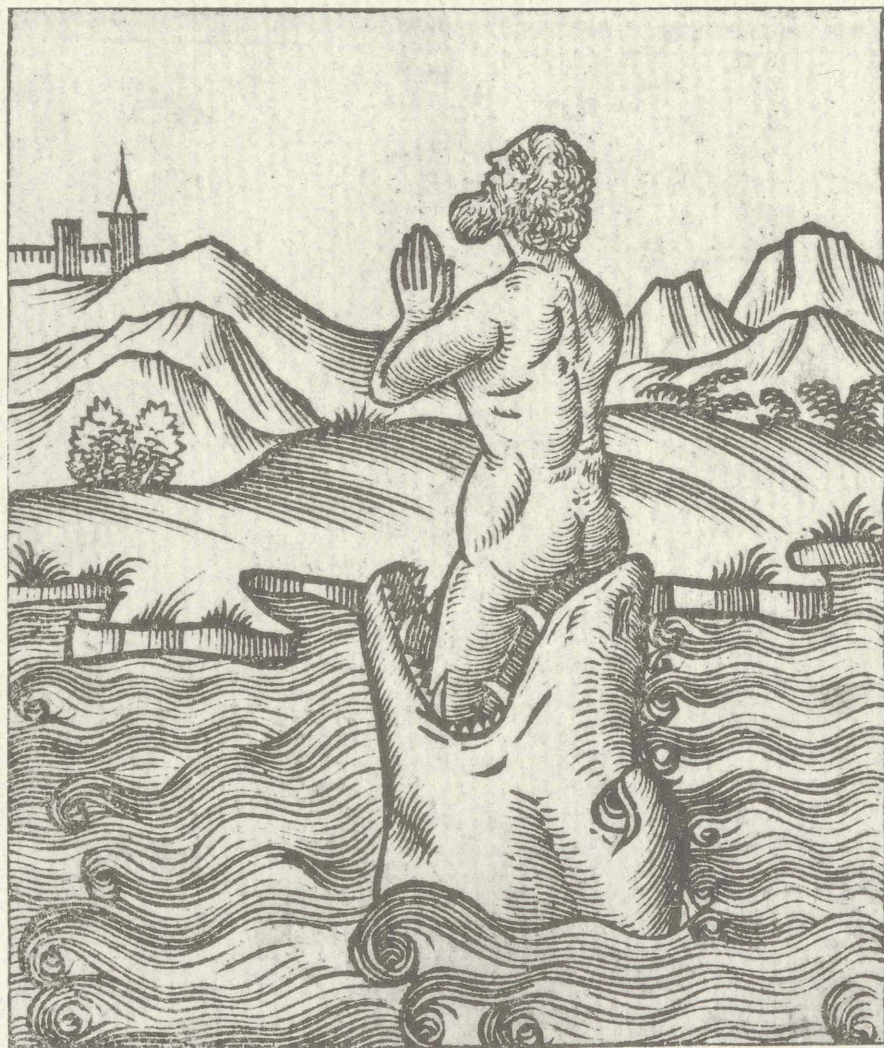
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*Dedicated to William Pearson Tolley (1900-1996)*

# Belfer Audio Archive: Our Cultural Heritage in Sound

BY JOHN HARVITH

*On 28 April 1995 John Harvith delivered the keynote address for "Soundings: Exploring the Depths of the Syracuse University Library's Belfer Audio Laboratory and Archive," a one-day symposium sponsored by the Syracuse University Library and the School of Music. Susan Stinson, curator of the Belfer collection, gave an overview of its resources, which include more than 300,000 recordings. A faculty-student panel, on the topic "Bringing Sound to the Classroom and the Classroom to Sound," was followed by a second panel, "Breaking the University Sound Barrier," featuring Chuck Klaus, senior producer at WCNY-FM, and collector Frederick P. Williams. Participants later toured the Belfer facility, after which Andrew Waggoner, director of the School of Music, and several music students made their own cylinder recording as they sang Syracuse University's alma mater into an Edison recording horn. What follows is an edited version of Harvith's keynote speech.*

WHEN I WAS INTERVIEWED for my current position here in 1989, University administrators asked me why I was interested in Syracuse. They were taken aback when I responded without hesitation, "Because of the audio archive." "You mean, it's not because of our reputation in sports?" I responded that I had no interest in or knowledge of sports and asked in all innocence whether that was another element of Syracuse's fame.

Normally, one doesn't think of romance in connection with a

John Harvith, executive director of National Media Relations at Syracuse University, is coauthor, with Susan Edwards Harvith, of *Edison, Musicians, and the Phonograph* (Greenwood Press, 1987). During the 1970s he wrote music criticism for *The Ann Arbor News* and *High Fidelity/Musical America*; he taught a winter-term music criticism course at Oberlin College during the 1980s. He earned the B.A. degree in music history and the J.D. degree from The University of Michigan.

recording archive, either. But in at least one situation I know of, this was indeed the case.

It all happened in the fall of 1965 at the recordings collection and listening room of Wayne State University in Detroit. A new undergraduate student at Wayne, I stood transfixed in front of a whole wall of 78 rpm albums, many of them rare, all of them items that I wanted to hear. As I gazed intently at the album spines, one of the listening room work-study interns stole silently behind me and spoke in hushed tones, as the room was filled with music students wearing headsets, listening to assigned LP recordings. “Those are 78s; the LPs are on that wall,” she whispered, pointing to the opposite side of the room, assuming that I was misguided. “I know they’re 78s,” I whispered back; “I’ve collected them for years.” She looked at me in amazement. Then she asked, “Who are some of your favorite artists?” “Well,” I answered, “Geraldine Farrar, . . .” but before I could go any further, she let out an ear-piercing shriek, and I immediately put my hand over her mouth. The whole room full of students stared at us, at first alarmed, and then annoyed. I led her out into the hall, discovered that Metropolitan Opera soprano Farrar was her idol, and that her name was Susan Edwards.

The rest was history, albeit slow-moving history. Eventually—after seven years’ worth of evenings and afternoons spent listening to old recordings, going to concerts and opera performances, and attending old films—we married and embarked on an adventure in joint research on the history of recording that resulted in the audiovisual exhibition, series of symposia, and book titled *Edison, Musicians, and the Phonograph*.

That love of and interest in music and recordings led us to Syracuse University some twenty-four years ago to begin our research.

Let us recall at the start that Syracuse has a long and distinguished musical pedigree: the first degree-granting college of fine arts in the United States and the nation’s first to grant a degree in music and require four years of study in both applied music and theory. Among the college’s early faculty was the highly influential musical pedagogue and author Percy Goetschius, who was given an honorary doctorate by Syracuse University in 1892 and went on to

fame as head of the theory and composition department of the Institute of Musical Art, which later became part of New York's Juilliard School; Goetschius was followed at Syracuse by a stream of renowned faculty over the years, including William Henry Berwald, Arthur Poister, Ernst Bacon, Louis Krasner, Howard and Helen Boatwright, and Frederick Marvin, among many others; and such significant alumni as Donald Jay Grout (class of 1923), the eminent music historian, and the composer Carlisle Floyd.

In the 1960s, the School of Music administered the official university music program of the Chautauqua Institution, which I attended for two summers as a piano student. But the aspect of Syracuse University that meant the most to me was the archive headed by the renowned recording historian Walter Welch.

When Susan and I resolved in 1971 to pursue research on Thomas Edison and his recording company, the logical first stop on our odyssey was the Syracuse audio archive, then, in its pre-Belfer years, located in the basement of the Continental Can Company building. Although the atmosphere was dark, dingy, and cluttered, the collection was impressive and the insights provided by Welch unique. The collection had complete sets of the Victor and Columbia 78 rpm masterworks albums, but more important to us, extremely rare Edison Diamond Disc and cylinder recordings.

Although we were young researchers, still graduate students at The University of Michigan, Walter lavished a great deal of time and attention on us, outlining in painstaking fashion his methods for rerecording cylinders and Diamond Discs and explaining what made the Edison acoustical method of recording singular: Edison's decision to have the recording studio acoustically as dead and non-reverberant as possible so that the singer's or instrumentalist's voice would emerge from the metal phonograph horn with a clarity "un-colored" by an acoustical space other than that of the room in which the recording was being played. This is why the Edison disc recordings sound so natural, unforced, and brilliant when played on a laboratory model machine from the period (ca. 1914-26). Our two-day visit with Walter also gave us an introduction to the remarkable, yet virtually unknown, classical recordings issued by the

Edison Company—recordings that only now are beginning to be discovered and appreciated by connoisseurs of “golden age” vocalism, pianism, and string playing.

At the time we began our research, major music critics and music historians looked at us as if we were just a bit daft. Now the issues of musical reproduction we explored and the Edison recordings of Claudia Muzio, Giovanni Martinelli, Jacques Urlus, Carl Flesch, and Rachmaninoff are being taken seriously. In time historians will look more closely at the Edison discs left behind by Frieda Hempel, Anna Case, Margaret Matzenauer, Karl Jörn, Elisabeth Schumann, and others.

Edison himself, as we discovered in the course of our research and revealed in our book, was a seminal figure in the history of recording. In addition to inventing the medium, he originated many of the attitudes and concepts tied inextricably to the process:

- the attitude that recorded performances have to be mechanically perfect in every way, even if this results in meticulous, but dull, interpretations;
- the concept of recording as a medium separate from live performance (“The phonograph is not an opera house!” Edison declared—he found stage personality intrusive and out of place on a recording). Edison personally selected repertoire and artists he deemed “suitable for the phonograph”—and there were plenty of artists and compositions he felt were “unsuitable” for the phonograph, from the vocalism of Conchita Supervia, Titta Ruffo, Tito Schipa, and Cantor Josef Rosenblatt to works by Mozart and Debussy;
- the concept of utilitarianism in music, a concept later translated into MUZAK, and a concept that Edison introduced in 1921 with a booklet on mood music—getting music to work for you, as the booklet put it—in order to induce moods that could give more energy, soothe raw nerves, bring peace of mind. Photos exist showing an Edison phonograph in the workplace used to improve worker productivity, just as MUZAK is used today;
- the concept of longer playing times on recordings, to allow for



uninterrupted recorded performances of lengthy compositions (Edison introduced the first commercial long-playing record in 1926);

- the concept of lip-synching, which can be traced back to Edison's "tone tests," where a performer on the concert stage sang or played in public in tandem with one of his or her Edison recordings, imitating the phonographic reproduction of his or her voice and then ceasing to sing or play while the recording continued to play alone (this done to demonstrate the superiority of Edison recordings).

Our example of research at the audio archive only scratches the surface of what can be done with this world-class cultural resource, however, since the Belfer Audio Laboratory and Archive is truly a sleeping giant on this campus.

Because recording is and always has been a commercial medium, some recordings were only made privately, as airchecks, or as test pressings, while other historically significant recordings have remained in print only as long as they have retained their commercial viability. Even with the explosion of reissued material brought out on compact discs, only a small fraction of the last 100 years' worth of recordings is available to us on the open market or in libraries—and that includes the collections of virtually all the great colleges and universities. I know this from experience. Because each time a sea change in recording medium takes place—from cylinders and 78s to LPs and reel-to-reel tapes to cassettes and CDs—public libraries, as well as those of most colleges and universities, jettison their collections to embrace the latest technology. As a student in the 1960s I watched this happen as the libraries of Wayne State University and The University of Michigan put out 78s on tables for students and faculty to take or throw away. Now LPs are suffering the same fate.

And the record companies can be—and have been—just as cavalier about their old recordings, not seeing them as cultural assets, but rather as economic burdens once they cease to sell in large enough quantities. Columbia Records, for instance, threw out its corporate collection of 78s once its introduction of the LP con-

quered the market. When CBS wanted to reissue in the 1970s some of the greatest 78 rpm performances of the 1930s by violinist Joseph Szigeti and the Budapest String Quartet, for instance, it had to rely on private collections to provide the source materials it needed to make the reissues possible.

Should the record companies now decide to discard their file copies of LPs, thinking that tape and CD copies of these materials are sufficient, they may again be throwing out their heritage, because we know that LPs have a long life span; no one knows how long CDs will last, and tapes have a short life span.

This is the fallout from being dependent upon a commercial industry for the preservation of our cultural heritage in sound. And this is why the Belfer collection is an irreplaceable treasure.

What is another reason for this archive's significance? It brings history to aural life.

One of the most memorable things anyone has ever said to me about music came from musicologist James Hepokoski, formerly of Oberlin College, now at the University of Minnesota. What Jim said was both incredibly simple and profound: Music of the past tells us what it *felt* like to live during the period when it was created.

The Belfer archive allows us to feel this sense of history even more vividly, because we can hear what musicians, artists, authors, actors, statesmen, politicians, and other historical figures actually sounded like. This is emotional, visceral communication that goes far beyond the power of the printed page. And some of this is information available nowhere else—it is locked in this building as an intellectual trust for future generations. As pianist-composer Abram Chasins said in our book, "Recording has done for music and musicians what the printing press did for literature, nothing short of that." But only, I might add, if those recordings have been preserved and are accessible.

In the case of the archive, this means that there are vistas of untapped historical material waiting for scholars to investigate—untold numbers of master's theses, doctoral dissertations, books and articles to be written, and courses to be taught not only in music, but in the history of photography, film, and theater; American political history; communications history; sociology; anthropology;

the history of technology; engineering; the physics of sound; African American and Latino studies; and popular culture. There is work to be done on the private recordings of film composer Franz Waxman, recorded interviews with Margaret Bourke-White, racist coon songs and crude humorous monologues preserved on turn-of-the-century Edison cylinders, ethnic recordings from early in the century, World War II news broadcasts, the sole cylinder purported to be by the great soprano Adelina Patti in her prime, recordings by presidential candidates in 1908, test pressings by Lotte Lehmann and Arturo Toscanini, little-known jazz and popular music recordings that represent the only way this music has been preserved. These are but a few of the many topics that wait to be explored.

One vast area of personal interest that pertains to all of this is oral history. Our Edison book is, in effect, an oral history of the phonograph from the time of Edison to the age of the CD. We set out to record the feelings, attitudes, experiences, philosophies, and factual reminiscences of major and minor recording figures—performers, composers, producers, engineers.

What do musicians, engineers, and producers have to say about their recordings and how recording technology has affected music-making? Do recordings really reproduce the concert experience? Can they? Should they? Are they reliable documents of a musician's artistry? What about the ethics of editing? What is there to say about recent technological developments that make it possible for famous artists to add their vocal solos one at a time and miles apart in creating "layered" performances? What of other developments that make it possible for audio consumers to sit at home and alter interpretations of recorded repertoire digitally to suit their own fancies?

Much more work in this area of oral history remains to be done, because the march of technological development in recording history stops for no one—and our students can be trained in this area of historical research.

Nor should collected oral histories be limited to the topic of recording. Strenuous efforts could be made to collect the reminiscences of emeriti faculty, administrators, and staff about the cul-

tural, social, and intellectual past of this great institution before that information is lost forever.

This impressive collection—the largest university sound archive in the United States and the largest commercial cylinder collection in the nation—can be harnessed to the investigation of performance practice in this century. One of the major preoccupations of the last quarter of this century has been with so-called “historically informed performance,” trying to recreate period styles of performing music.

In teaching music performance, music history, and music criticism, older recordings perform a unique service: they can tell us how a particular artist performed a particular piece of music at a particular point in time.

But just as one had to exercise uncommon judgment in interpreting pronouncements by the Delphic Oracle in ancient times, one has to be very careful in interpreting exactly what these recordings mean, if one intends to use them to divine what performing styles were like in the last century or early in this century. It’s all too easy to take older recordings of Mozart, Mahler, or Tchaikovsky that sound bizarre to our ears and make the logical leap that because this is an old recording by a musician who enjoyed a large reputation in his or her day and because the interpretation sounds so foreign to our way of doing things today, this must be the way this music was performed generally in an earlier era.

It’s a little bit like a physical anthropologist trying to construct a complete skeleton of one of our primate ancestors from the discovery of a single tooth.

Music is one of the arts, not one of the sciences. This area is one in which a great deal of knowledge of older recordings is called for, as well as a background in the oral and written historical record.

There is a whole school of thought, for instance, bestowing legitimacy upon the bizarre interpretive touches that celebrated conductors Wilhelm Furtwängler and Willem Mengelberg applied to standard repertoire in their recordings from earlier in the century, believing that these odd-sounding interpretations somehow stem directly from “authentic” nineteenth-century performances. This is where supplementary reading will help to explain what one hears in the old recordings at Belfer.

One hundred years ago, legendary conductor Felix Weingartner wrote his brief but illuminating book *On Conducting*. In it Weingartner explained that the celebrated pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow (1830–1894) in 1880 created a phenomenal stir in the musical world with his Meiningen Orchestra, producing with this touring ensemble a technical finish, precision, and balance unknown before that time; with it, however, came a capriciousness and exaggeration in interpretive style that intensified over the years and subverted the character and meaning of the compositions he conducted.

Because of von Bülow's fame and technical powers in music, Weingartner wrote, he was imitated by other conductors, who constantly modified tempo, inserted unwanted pauses in musical lines, brought out unimportant inner voices, and in other ways distorted works in order to call attention to themselves, out of vanity. Before von Bülow, according to Weingartner, conductors were metronomic; Wagner tried to introduce a certain modicum of natural flexibility in meter; von Bülow distorted this plasticity out of all proportion.

By the musical examples Weingartner provided in his book, one can recognize the types of distortions one can hear in the Mengelberg and Furtwängler performances in the archive's collection. And by listening to Albert Coates's 1920s Beethoven symphony recordings in Belfer one can hear the kind of metronomic orchestral performances Weingartner also described. By listening to early orchestral recordings from the 1920s and 1930s by Karl Muck, Weingartner, Bruno Walter, Sir Thomas Beecham, and Toscanini, one can hear conductors with musical roots in the nineteenth century who obviously rejected the kinds of interpretive devices introduced by von Bülow late in the nineteenth century. The actual recordings bring this sort of information to life.

But you won't gain such knowledge merely by going to the library and checking out a book or going to your local record store; these nuggets of information can only be found by doing research in a collection as comprehensive as that of the Belfer Audio Laboratory and Archive—which is what makes it one of the unique and invaluable foundations of Syracuse University's greatness.

As Maurice Maeterlinck wrote about recordings in 1928, “The greatest masterpieces of human genius lie from this day forward in a few discs, heavy with spiritual secrets, that a child of three can hold in his little hands.”