

“CAPTURING” SOUND: THE PHONOGRAPH IN (EARLY) FOLK MUSIC RESEARCH

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Even though folk music collections rich in written documents had existed for a long time, it was the invention of sound recording that – from today’s point of view – marked the “real” beginnings of folk music research and added an entirely new aspect to the discipline. However, although the use of a recording machine was undisputed in the field of ethnomusicology – and indeed a prerequisite, as stated in the motion to establish the Vienna Audiovisual Research Archive – some folk music researchers had serious doubts whether such an apparatus would be necessary at all, fearing that it might “destroy” the music recorded and render it “lifeless.” Today, after 100 years of sound recording, we must distinguish between speech (real sound) and writing, between commercial and research recordings, and recordings made for different purposes and reflecting different needs. This paper deals with the change in folk music research since the very first recordings, the influence and acceptance of the new technology, and aspects of the historical framework.

Keywords: Sound recording, Phonogrammarchiv, folk music recordings, folk music researcher, Pommer.

Čeprav so zbirke ljudske glasbe v pisni obliki obstajale že dolgo, je iznajdba zvočnega snemanja – z današnjega gledišča – označevala “resnične” začetke raziskovanja ljudske glasbe in je vedi dodala popolnoma nov vidik. Uporaba snemalne naprave na področju etnomuzikologije sicer ni bila vprašljiva – pravzaprav je bila predpogoj, kot je izraženo v predlogu za ustanovitev dunajskega Phonogrammarchiva –, vendar so imeli nekateri raziskovalci ljudske glasbe resne pomisleke, ali je takšna naprava sploh potrebna, saj so se bali, da bi lahko ‘uničila’ posneto glasbo. Danes, po sto letih glasbenega dokumentiranja, razlikujemo med govorom (resničnim zvokom) in zapisom, med komercialnimi in raziskovalnimi posnetki, med posnetki za različne namene in posnetki, ki so odraz različnih situacij. Prispevek obravnava spremembe v raziskovanju ljudske glasbe od prvih posnetkov, vpliv in sprejem nove tehnologije, upošteva pa tudi zgodovinski okvir.

Ključne besede: zvočno zapisovanje, Phonogrammarchiv, posnetki ljudske glasbe, raziskovalec ljudske glasbe, Pommer.

INTRODUCTION

The invention of sound recording not only changed the use of – and therefore the contact or the acquaintance with – sound material in the commercial field, where it served merely as entertainment, but it also promised new scholarly approaches and research methods, and the academic world, quickly realizing the potential of the new medium, was eager to use it for its own purposes. There was no doubt that only sound recordings, which allow repeatable and controlled evaluation of sound phenomena, could provide the necessary basis for a wide range of disciplines such as comparative musicology, ethnomusicology, linguistics, dialectology, or phonetics. Having such “objective” sources, it seemed possible to discuss aspects such as specific melodies, harmonies, timbre, or performance practice in a completely new way.

Alongside the scholarly use of the new technology, the idea of establishing sound archives arose. Our predecessors were aware of the importance of such recordings not only as resources for research, but also as material representing cultural heritage. Even at that time, around 1900, they feared finding a Europeanized (global) culture worldwide. Therefore such sound recordings were able to represent foreign and changing cultures. Sound archives were to be the tools to keep cultural memory alive and would allow the study of diachronic issues – for example, various influences or amalgamation.

THE AUDIOVISUAL RESEARCH ARCHIVE IN VIENNA

The Audiovisual Research Archive (Germ. *Phonogrammarchiv*) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences is a typical result of such considerations, because from its beginnings it has been a repository of sound recordings on the one hand, and a research institute on the other. In the founding motion, three main tasks were distinguished:

The first task was languages, a topic that was explained at great length and systematically. The aim was to record all European languages spoken at the end of the 19th century in order to fix the rhythm, the accent, and even the timbre of the language; this was to be followed by all dialects of European languages, and ultimately all the languages of the world. In order to create sources for comparative linguistic studies, the ingenious idea was to record standardized texts such as the Lord's Prayer or – later on for German only – the *Wenker-Sätze*: sentences without much meaning but including specific vocabulary to study expressions and pronunciation. The same speaker was also asked for a sample of free speech. Working with such a corpus would enable linguists to compare various languages and dialects, even *at home*; moreover, the same example could be repeated as often as necessary and was available as an objective source. However, word recordings were not only thought of as parts of the collection but also as sources for research on the physiology of speech or the psychology of language [cf. Exner 1900: 1–2].

The second task was music – but not classical music, although it would have been interesting to listen to Beethoven performing, had he not died many years before the invention of sound recording. Classical music was the domain of the record industry and therefore not the aim of a research sound archive. As Exner, one of the founders and the first head of the Audiovisual Research Archive, pointed out, the music of “primitive peoples” would be especially interesting. Such recordings, he asserted, could form the basis for the beginnings of comparative musicology [cf. Exner 1900: 2–3]. Previously, personal impressions resulted in descriptions that could not be verified and were influenced by the “European” eye; now, however, the invention of sound recording and the use of a phonograph in field research indicated a new period. Concentrating on musicology, Carl Stumpf argued that real sound, and not only musical notation, should be the subject of research [Blaukopf

1995: 35]. Interestingly, there is no mention of the need to record folk music as well, as is standard today.

The third task was "voice portraits," a task very specific to the Viennese Audiovisual Research Archive. Famous personalities from politics, the sciences, and the arts were asked to speak into the phonograph to preserve for posterity a livelier memory than afforded by autographs or portraits.

The motion was accepted and the archive was founded, but without any regular staff; although money was available for paying idealists first on an hourly, and then on a weekly or monthly basis, a permanent position did not appear.

THE AUDIOVISUAL RESEARCH ARCHIVE AND FOLK MUSIC RECORDINGS

In 1903, it was hoped that the situation would change for the better. Because the personal network between academia and politics was very close, the launching of the major national undertaking of recording folk music in Austria (*Das Volkslied in Österreich*) also became known to the academy:¹ Wilhelm von Hartel, the mentor of this project, was not only the minister of public worship and education, but also the academy's vice-president.² By this time, the Audiovisual Research Archive had already gained experience in recording Austrian dialects: in 1902, Joseph Seemüller had begun the systematic collection of dialectological recordings (using strict guidelines of documentation and including a transcription of the spoken texts), continued by his colleagues and pupils. The first speakers were students from various parts of Austria and versed in their own dialects. Such recordings were made in the studio; later on, linguists made field recordings as well. It therefore seemed sensible to join the folk song project on the basis of those principles. However, the Audiovisual Research Archive and the academy were mainly interested in creating a position financed by the ministry. This plan, however, did not come to fruition, and thus the cooperation was never begun.

Judging by the Audiovisual Research Archive's collections, early Austrian folk music was never collected systematically, with one exception: the phonographic fieldwork conducted by Karl M. Klier, which, well-prepared and extensively documented [Klier 1929], was to

¹ See the report of 19 February 1903 of the meeting of the *Committee for the Audiovisual Research Archive* (Akten Phonogrammarchiv 1 Ar ÖAW 70, no. 222/1903): *Hofrat Heinzel wies speciell auf eine Aktion jüngster Zeit hin, dahin gehend, eine auf Staatskosten durchzuführende Sammlung österreichischer Volkslieder herzustellen, welche Aktion zweckmäßig mit dem Unternehmen des Phonogramm-Archives vereinigt werden könnte.* (Court Counselor Heinzel drew special attention to a recent program to be carried out at public expense to create a collection of Austrian folk songs, a program that could expediently be joined with the enterprise of the Audiovisual Research Archive.)

² Three years later, Wilhelm von Hartel was invited to the Audiovisual Research Archive for a voice portrait in which he stressed the importance of that institution and its value for scholarship and cultural heritage; the recordings have the numbers Ph 202–203 (now published as OEAW PHA CD 8/1: 38) and were made on 26 January 1906 at the Audiovisual Research Archive by Fritz Hauser.

become the largest folk music series among the historical collections of the Audiovisual Research Archive, comprising a total of 21 recordings. Within the historical collections there are only 84 Austrian folk music recordings, which came into existence in the course of other, mainly linguistic, projects.

In order to explain the production of folk music recordings within language-oriented projects, the following two questions seem helpful: what did the researchers intend to investigate, and what did they really achieve? Let us have a look at the first expeditions of 1901, when the *Archiv-Phonograph* was put to a test. Paul Kretschmer, a linguist, set out to record the Greek dialects of the Isle of Lesbos, but eventually made only recordings of singing, not of the spoken word. Why? It is not until after a detailed examination of the material, publications on the history of the archive, and similar documents that one gains insight into the true circumstances: As it turns out, apart from all the technical difficulties (the machine was too heavy, people had to come to the researcher and not the other way around, etc.), the informants felt more comfortable singing rather than speaking. Consequently, the researcher concluded that the new technology would be more attractive for the study of songs [Exner 1902: 27]. This is the reason why the archive holds early recordings of song from this region. The same approach can be observed within other, mainly linguistic, projects elsewhere in Europe – for example, Greenland, Ireland, Wales, and Brittany – from which we have recordings not only of speech but also song. The projects for collecting (German) dialects in Austria mentioned above also generated several sung rather than spoken items.

All in all, it seems that folk music recordings, especially Austrian (Alpine) ones, “happened by chance.” This conclusion, though, would contrast with the common consideration of those days, when linguists recommended sound recording in the domain of singing³ and ethnomusicologists took it for granted that only sound recordings were the true source in their field of research. From today’s point of view there is no doubt that sound recording is a prerequisite within folk music research; back then, however, heated discussions were held on whether the recording of folk music would really be necessary or not.

JOSEF POMMER’S POSITION WITH REGARD TO (AUSTRIAN) FOLK MUSIC RECORDINGS

This discussion did not start until 1906, when Franz Scheirl wrote his programmatic article on the importance of phonography for folk music research [Scheirl 1906, cf. also Haid 1979].⁴ Scheirl, a school inspector and dialect poet, was a distinguished expert on

³ Paul Kretschmer noticed the importance of recording folk songs and praised the apparatus as an indispensable device: *...hier bietet sich wohl für die Thätigkeit des Phonographen das dankbarste Feld.... für die Aufnahme von Volksliedern dürfte der Apparat sich bald als ein unentbehrliches Hilfsmittel erweisen (...here the activity of those making recordings will probably benefit the most.... the device may soon prove itself to be an indispensable tool in the recording of folk songs)* [Exner 1902: 27].

⁴ This controversy was thus preceded by the events of 1903, when the Audiovisual Research Archive, in

folk music and made 32 dialect recordings in the Upper Pinzgau in 1905, six of them comprising songs. He was probably led by his experiences in this field research when he wrote in the journal *Das deutsche Volkslied* that the phonograph captured not only the melody but also the characteristic manner of singing, the rhythm, and the accent [Scheirl 1906: 85]. Josef Pommer, the editor, composed a reply following Scheirl's article and warned of overestimating this machine in the course of collecting folk music [Pommer 1906]. The question is: which thoughts drove Pommer to mistrust phonographic recording? His dispute with colleagues continued in 1909 during the world conference on the occasion of the centenary of Haydn's death. Section II, Exotic Music and Folklore, was chaired by Erich M. von Hornbostel and Ilmari Krohn.

The first paper was presented by Hans Pollak, a linguist and assistant at the Audiovisual Research Archive, dealing with *the equipment provided by the academy for researchers in the field, mainly for musicological purposes* [Adler 1909: 224]. Pollak took up the cudgels for the use of the *Archiv-Phonograph* in music and language research, in order both to facilitate study at home and to preserve a sound recording that would enable future scholars to listen to the true sound of former times. Pommer's reply was quite gentle at first; he pointed out that, though the phonograph deserved respect, it had to be seen merely as an instrumental aid unable to replace the expert musician. But then, somewhat critically and from his very personal point of view, he argued that what matters most is the mood of the singer, and that the machine would not generate an atmosphere conducive to singing, but instead destroy it [Adler 1909: 225]. Pommer's protest could be explained from his ideas of the characteristic folk song. As a representative of the romantic, patriotic, and ultimately nationalistic tradition, he claimed to know the true and authentic folk song; only he could feel the real folk song [cf. Mochar-Kircher 2004: 346ff.]. It may, therefore, be concluded that Pommer probably feared that this machine would reproduce – and the carrier would preserve – something that would not fit into his concept.

On the other hand, however, it is interesting to see that Pommer must have been in contact with the Audiovisual Research Archive. It is not known if he was invited or if he offered himself to be recorded. Although Pommer did not appreciate recording folk songs, he himself sang various "calls" and yodels, alone and together with Karl Kronfuß in 1906,⁵ the year he had his argument with Franz Scheirl about the value of phonographic recording in folk music research. Perhaps this production took place in connection with the attempted cooperation with the folk song project, as already mentioned. However, it could also have been that Pommer was invited to produce a voice portrait [cf. above and Exner 1906: 317; 1907: 337]. In any case, Pommer solely recorded melodies he had written down and then performed. It is such performance that I would like to draw attention to, if compared to a yodel recorded on site by Exner in 1902, sung by Ägidius Huber, a self-taught singer (Germ.

the hope of creating a position, tried to join the folk song project (Germ. *Volksliedunternehmen*) with the aim of recording and collecting folk music systematically (see above).

⁵ Recording numbers Ph 212, 305, 307–308, 319–320, published OEAW PHA CD 22/1: 20–25.

Natursänger) and native of the Salzkammergut region.⁶ Pommer announced his recording and the title, and then some kind of scene followed in the studio. Helga Thiel and Walter Deutsch call these recordings *substitutionary documentation* [Thiel and Deutsch 2001: 70–72; cf. also Thiel and Deutsch 2004: 34]. The audio impression of these two recordings is of course rather different. Moreover, from the archival point of view it is necessary to discuss the various qualities that are also important in scholarly work. The question arises: why was Pommer to be recorded at the Audiovisual Research Archive? He knew the policy of preserving recordings for future and further research. In my opinion, he took this opportunity to register “his” real folk tune in “his” performance done by “the” expert. He was no doubt aware of the consequences in folk music research; indeed, there is reason to believe that even today his influence can still be felt in some activities of folk music making.

Another speaker at Haydn’s centenary conference, Josef Götz, criticized the enormous weight and high price of the *Archiv-Phonograph*, but praised the possibility of preserving fast-changing cultural expressions such as dialects [Adler 1909: 225]. Father Schmidt defended sound recording and suggested harmonizing recording techniques⁷ [Adler 1909: 25]. In her paper, Evgeniia Lineva (a.k.a. Eugenie Lineff) picked out transcriptions as a central theme to show the objectivity of sound recording and to emphasize the lack of notation with respect to variation [Adler 1909: 235–236]. She actually handed over Russian folk music recordings to the archive [Exner 1914: 402], but these cylinders, unfortunately, did not survive. Father Schmidt honored Lineva’s ideas and emphasized that sound recording would be particularly successful if the researcher was acquainted with the respective culture. Problems would arise with unknown non-European cultures, and he suggested addressing oneself to missionaries or colonial officials [Adler 1909: 244]. These discussions, then, seem to admit two conclusions: the importance of being an expert and the necessity of compiling additional transcriptions. Although Pommer considered these two issues as the only essential aspects, others also pointed out objectivity as a major advantage for any sound recording.

CONSEQUENCES

The history of collecting folk tunes is characterized by voluminous publications, with everything revolving around transcription and publication. In those days, nobody was skeptical about writing down musical notes, because these were accepted as primary sources. In the course of time, however, the acceptance of writing music changed. Today we all agree that even the best, most adequate, and most accurate transcription only possesses the character of a secondary source, whereas the audio recording alone has the quality of a primary source [Stockmann 1992/1997: 17]. Yet it took quite some time until such a view

⁶ Recording number Ph 177, published OEAW PHA CD 22/1: 1.

⁷ While Edison phonographs were in use in Berlin, Vienna developed the *Archiv-Phonograph*; the former recorded on wax cylinders, and the latter on wax discs.

became universally accepted, as is well illustrated by the following: judging by a report of the Committee for the Audiovisual Research Archive (Germ. *Phonogrammarchivkommission*) from December 1914, Konrad Mautner, one of Pommer's companions, had already planned a project to record songs, work calls, and so on in the Salzkammergut.⁸ But due to the beginning of World War I this recording expedition had to be postponed. Still, we know that Mautner or his friend there⁹ made recordings and probably used these as basis for transcriptions, which were then published;¹⁰ some more recordings must also have been made around that time; for example, in Styria by Johann Gollob [cf. Deutsch and Hois 2004: 55f.]. Even in 1929, Karl M. Klier wrote that folk music recordings were not necessarily made to build up a typical collection, but to serve as an aid when transcribing seemed very difficult or impossible; a phonograph should thus only be used in case of difficulties with writing down the music [Klier 1929: 2].

It was not until 1956, 50 years after the discussions between Scheirl and Pommer, that Walter Ruth used the same arguments as Scheirl to defend audio recordings: their value, he argued, lies in capturing the rhythmically free delivery of natural singers "uncivilized" by teachers or choral societies, whereas the transcriptions by Pommer and others unduly simplified the rhythm of the songs and made them conform to their ideas;¹¹ by this time, the phonographic method had of course already been widely accepted.

⁸ Cf. Protokoll der 37. Sitzung der Phonogramm-Archivs-Kommission am 18. Dezember 1914 (Akten Phonogrammarchiv 1 Ar ÖAW 70). no. 1142/1914: *Herr Konrad Mautner, der im Ausseer Landl altertümliche Lieder, Arbeitsrufe u. dgl. aufnehmen wollte, musste zufolge der Kriegereignisse die Durchführung seines bereits gut vorbereiteten Planes verschieben.* (Mr. Konrad Mautner, who wanted to record traditional songs, work calls, and so on in the Bad Aussee area, had to postpone the execution of the plans that he had already carefully worked out because of the occurrence of the war.)

⁹ *Yet his [Pommer's] authorship cannot be determined with any certainty, because the recordings could also have been made by Hermann Köberl (alias Veit), the innkeeper's son, whom Mautner had entrusted with the phonograph for recording purposes (see Mautner 1919: xii)* [Thiel and Deutsch 2004: 35].

¹⁰ Konrad Mautner. 1919. *Alte Lieder und Weisen aus dem Steyermärkischen Salzkammergute* (Old Songs and Customs from Salzkammergut, Styria). Vienna.

¹¹ See Ruth [1956: 18]:

Die Aufzeichnung von Volksliedern im mitteleuropäischen Raum stößt in tonaler Hinsicht selten auf Schwierigkeiten. Umso größer sind die Schwierigkeiten rhythmischer und metrischer Natur. Naturwüchsige Sänger, die nicht durch Schule oder Gesangverein 'zivilisiert' worden sind, singen rhythmisch völlig frei; ... Die Liedaufzeichner von Erk bis Pommer haben die Dinge weitgehend vereinfacht, indem sie die ihnen vorgesungenen Lieder in ein Taktschema pressen und sie so 'dirigierbar' und 'gesangvereinsfähig' machten.

(From the point of view of tonality, the transcription of folk songs in Central Europe rarely encounters difficulties. Much greater are the difficulties of a rhythmical and metrical nature. Self-taught singers that have not been "civilized" by schools or singing societies sing with a completely free rhythm; ... Transcribers from Erk to Pommer have extensively simplified matters in that they forced the songs that were sung in front of them into a time pattern and thus made them "conductable" and "suitable for singing societies.")

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UJETI ZVOK: FONOGRAF V (ZGODNJEM) RAZISKOVANJU LJUDSKE GLASBE

Dolgo je trajalo, da je snemanje postalo del raziskovanja ljudske glasbe, čeprav je bila ta metoda na splošno v etnomuzikologiji uporabljena že vse od začetkov zvočnega snemanja. Ko je bil fonograf končno sprejet, je bil rabljen predvsem za zahtevne skladbe ali za glasbo, ki raziskovalcu ni bila znana, in so posnetki tako predstavljali primerne temelje za transkripcijo – brez dvoma o pomembnosti v znanstvenem diskurzu. Raziskovalcem je bilo tako omogočeno, da poslušajo glasbo tolikokrat, kolikor je potrebno, da lahko delajo doma ipd. Zanimivo je, da je bilo zvočno snemanje dobrodošlo pri raziskovanju drugih, 'tujih' civilizacij, pri 'lastni', 'dobro znani' kulturi

pa se je zdelo nepotrebno. Danes bi nam, seveda, veliko pomenilo, če bi imeli zbirke ljudskih pesmi, ki bi se začele z najzgodnejšimi posnetki in bi zagotavljale sistematično spremljanje, leto za letom, pokrajine za pokrajino, kot je bilo v petdesetih letih 20. stoletja zasnovano snemanje. Za starejša obdobja pa se moramo naslanjati predvsem na pisne publikacije, na maloštevilne posnetke in nekatere hipoteze. Strinjamo se, da je popularna kultura (vključno z ljudsko glasbo) fenomen, ki temelji na simbiozi ljudi in njihove dediščine, ki se nenehno spreminja, zato bi radi te "faze" dokumentirali.

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