

78 RPM AT HOME: LOCAL PERSPECTIVES ON  
THE EARLY RECORDING INDUSTRY,  
INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM, ACADEMY OF MUSIC,  
ZAGREB AND ONLINE, 8–11 MARCH 2023\*

Coming in the last year of the project “The record industry in Croatia from 1927 to the end of the 1950s”, undertaken by the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research and Academy of Music in Zagreb, Croatia,<sup>1</sup> the conference *78 rpm at home: Local perspectives on the early recording industry* brought together (onsite and online) researchers from various disciplines. This was the opportunity to contextualise project research in a broader geographical and thematic perspective and connect researchers dealing with this growing field.

Over the last several years, the research on the discography and recording industry has intensified. What once started as an almost niche interest within popular music studies, given popular music’s organic relation to recordings and studio production as well as an interest in cultural practices of reception of recorded music, slowly gained traction in musicology. In ethnomusicology, the trajectory was somewhat different, since the discipline already relied on fieldwork recordings, but commercial recordings and discography have fairly recently become legitimate scientific sources. After the initial interest in the first inventors, histories and catalogues of big record companies and famous composers and performers, the contemporary, interdisciplinary focus moved to narratives and histories of labels, collectors, private archives, retailers and intermediaries, in between imperialism, global capitalism and local realities.<sup>2</sup>

\* The author’s conference attendance and the subsequent writing of this review were 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 project’s work package 2 “Safeguarding of Music as Cultural Heritage: Aspects of Institutionalisation and Technologicalisation” has already produced several results, including contributions to the study of discography (see the Main theme of the journal *Muzikologija-Musicology* No. 32 “Discography as a Scientific Source”, <https://muzikologija-musicology.com/index.php/MM/issue/view/no-32>, accessed 1 June 2023). As regards the Zagreb conference, presentations were given by Danka Lajić Mihajlović, the coordinator of this work package, as well as two project associates, Bojana Radovanović and Nataša Marjanović.

1 For more information, see the project website <https://www.ief.hr/en/research/projects/the-record-industry-in-croatia-from-1927-to-the-end-of-the-1950s/> (accessed 25 April 2023).

2 See, for example, a recent collection of papers edited by Roy and Moreda Rodriguez: Elodie

Similarly, the present conference was an astute overview of research in the field, covering several contemporary issues. Emphasis was put on commercial recordings, local labels and their relations with global corporations, as well as the overall importance of commercial discography. It was a well thought-through decision made by the conference organisers and the keynote lecturer, eminent musicologist and recorded music scholar Mark Katz, to offer an opening lecture, deftly titled *Seven or eight ways of thinking about the 78-rpm record*, that covered several coordinates among which the research on early recordings and discography is currently taking place. That lecture effectively set the tone and foreshadowed the topics presented throughout the conference.<sup>3</sup> In this review, the main conference topics (not necessarily in the order that they were presented) will be grouped according to several underlying themes: transnational aspects of discography in the form of dynamics between former empires and colonies, as well as homelands and diasporas; various actors (beyond composers and performers) and their roles in the recording business; artistic and technological specificities of recorded performances; recorded repertoires and implications of their selection and preservation; official and private archives, as well as the collaboration between scholars working in the academia and independent researchers or collectors.

The imperial undercurrents of the recording industry were explored in several papers. The first panel, detailing the cases of Brazil, Goa (India), Mozambique and Portugal, was presented by Pedro Aragão, Susana Sardo, Nalini Elvino de Sousa, and Cristiano Tsope. Here, the role of commercial recordings in colonising processes and the sound expansion of the empire was explored through particular narratives of former colonial power and the emancipation of its colonies. In addition to examples of recorded music under colonial rule in New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Malaysia (papers by Tan Sooi Beng, Samantha Owens, Don Niles and Bruni Tenakanai respectively), the research addressing these particular issues explored contemporary decolonising approaches.

Transnational aspects of discography were also considered in papers that dealt with homeland recordings in immigrant communities of the diasporas. Rebeka Kunej has taken into account Slovenian communities in the United States, Marcia Ostashewski explored private collections of Ukrainian communities in Canada, and Dora Dunatov investigated the South Slavic music in the US diaspora through the

Roy and Eva Moreda Rodríguez (eds.), *Phonographic Encounters: Mapping the Transnational Cultures of Sound 1890–1945* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022). This book was reviewed in *Musicology* No. 33: Marija Maglov, "Elodie A. Roy and Eva Moreda Rodríguez (Eds.), *Phonographic Encounters: Mapping Transnational Cultures of Sound, 1890–1945*: Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022", *Muzikologija/Musicology* 33 (2022): 261–64. <https://muzikologija-musicology.com/index.php/MM/article/view/68>.

<sup>3</sup> The full programme and abstracts can be found on the conference webpage <https://www.ief.hr/en/research/projects/project-diskograf/symposium-78rpm-at-home/> (accessed 25 April 2023). Recorded presentations are available on the project's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbB7k5WyiAf3XtFqhfs6KNw> (accessed 1 May 2023).

activities of the record seller John Filcich, noting the important fact that the industry, often discussed as an abstract entity, was actually embodied by human protagonists and their stories.

The papers on commercial recordings and middlemen involved in their distribution showed the complexities of the music recording business. The analysis of activities of middlemen, retailers and early companies, particularly with a focus on the Balkans and/or Central Europe was also brought in contributions by Martin Mejzr, Michal Studničný and Filip Šír (on mapping the activities by record retailers predominantly in the Czech lands), Risto Pekka Pennanen (company agents and middlemen in Bosnia and Herzegovina), Franz Lechleitner (labels in the early acoustic era in Europe), Ferenc János Szabó (on recordings in former Austro-Hungarian territories) and Veljko Lipovšćak and Ivan Mirnik (on Mavro Drucker, the first Croatian publisher of gramophone records). Outside of the European context, Tara Browner explored early cylinders and discs in the United States and instigated an interesting discussion on class markers interwoven with different labels, technologies and repertoires.

Performers and performances in recording sessions were discussed in various ways within several papers. Inja Stanović presented her experimental, practice-based research of early recording practices, by reconstructing the performing and recording practice of a horn player Charles Heylbroeck preserved on discs released by Chantal record label. Stanović's contribution was valuable for its delving into technological peculiarities (and sound consequences) of mechanical recordings. Damir Imamović analysed the reception of early recorded Bosnian music and its style, and the far-reaching consequences of their suppression for the formation of ideas of traditional music. Jelena Joković analysed recordings of selected folk songs. The acclaimed singer Mijat Mijatović's numerous recordings were discussed in two papers: David D. Pokrajac and Saša Spasojević delved into Mijatović's gramophone recordings broadcast on Radio Belgrade, while Danka Lajić Mihajlović and Bojana Radovanović discussed various remediations of the song cycle *Mijatovke* (dedicated to Mijatović) bringing forward this particular theoretical problem.

The influence of record companies on recognising and popularising certain music styles was shown by Joško Čaleta using the example of the Yugoslav record house Jugoton and Dalmatian songs which served as a forerunner of *klapa* singing specific for this region. Jelka Vukobratović presented an interesting discussion on how translations of international pop music lyrics highlighted mediations between emerging global culture and its local, socio-politically contextualised variations, as exemplified in Jugoton recordings. Čaleta's, Vukobratović's and Dunatov's previously mentioned papers were based on the results of the organiser's project on Croatian discography. Edison Bell Penkala recordings were the topic of Macedonian researcher Trayce Arssow. A particular type of repertoire was presented in Nataša Marjanović's research on Edison Bell Penkala's edition *Tradition of Serbian Orthodox Church Chant*. Marjanović's research revealed a variety of this commercial label's perhaps unexpected output, as well as fruitful results coming from the exchange of knowledge over national and regional borders when such a transnational topic as discography is in question.

In most of the presentations mentioned, however, the recorded content in question was either traditional or popular music. The title of Ivana Vesic's paper promised the focus on film schlagers and popular music and dances. Rebeka Kunej, within the panel on Slovenian discography, brought forward the rarely addressed usage of commercial recordings in ethnochoreology research. A separate panel by Will Prentice, Patrick Feaster and Xiaoshi Wei on the early spoken-word recordings was a welcomed addition to predominately music-oriented talks, reminding us of the usefulness of recordings in research of broader cultural issues of Europe, the United States and China. Focus on broader cultural and political issues was also carried out in Victor Johansson's take on recordings by the Swedish Communist Youth League and label Avanti.

Official archives and collections, such as Toffalori and Benedetti collections at the Department of Cultural Heritage of the University of Bologna presented by Filomena Latorre, Angelo Pompilio and Madalena Roversi, the International Library of African Music at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, presented by Lee Watkins, or the Digital Collection of Gramophone Records at the Institute of Ethnomusicology of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU), problematised in a panel by Slovenian researchers (Drago Kunej, Mojca Kovačič, Urša Šivic and Rebeka Kunej), served as a reminder of the importance of archival work and collections of recordings for the further research. These also pointed to an exclusion at the very core of the archives' institutional mechanisms that was sometimes the reason why commercial recordings were not taken seriously or regarded as worthy enough to be preserved and considered the objects of scholarly work. But, as Drago Kunej emphasised, commercial recordings are "sounding examples" of the commercialisation of traditional music and, as such, a valuable research source. Separately, important questions on approaches to commercial recordings in ethnomusicology were raised by Gerda Lechleitner.

Even more so than public archives, the private archives and collections served almost as a *sine qua non* of every serious research on early recordings. A particularly poignant acknowledgment came in the shape of numerous papers dedicated to the late Milan Milovanović, who was a record collector and expert collaborator of the National Library of Serbia. This is why the organisers' inclusion of several prominent record collectors' research papers was notable and welcomed. The presentation by Nikola Zekić on perceptions of a visually impaired collector, served not only as a testimony of a unique experience of "collecting blindly", as the author put it, but also as a reminder of the fact that dealing with recordings includes aspects of their materiality and sensorial giveaways. Particular touch or smell of certain label's recordings, as well as distinctive noises that lace the actual recorded music, are inextricable parts of research on recordings and cannot be put aside in favour of the content alone.

The importance of collaborative research between collectors (independent researchers) and researchers from academia was illustrated by Zekić engaging in almost every discussion following the presentation, sharing his vast knowledge or interesting data with other researchers. Collectors' and scholars' synergy was underlined with the inclusion of presentations by Lipovščak and Mirnik, independent researchers who also helped with the hosts' research project, and Pokrajac and Spa-

sojević, who, on the other hand, are valuable consultants on the project APPMES conducted by the Institute of Musicology SASA. Finally, collecting as specific cultural activity was a separate topic in Matija Jerković's talk.

Overall, it could be said that in addition to presenting the important, pioneering results of research on Croatian music discography, also relevant to other countries in the region, the conference organisers succeeded in making this conference a good networking spot for researchers around the world. In the meeting over several days, the overlapping interests, topics and questions certainly planted seeds of ideas for further projects to come in the explorations of commercial recordings.

*Marija Maglov*