

## Reviews

*Phonographic Encounters: Mapping Transnational Cultures of Sound, 1890–1945*. Edited by Elodie A. Roy and Eva Moreda Rodríguez. London: Routledge, 2021. xv+268 pp. ISBN : 978-1-032-05711-8  
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*Phonographic Encounters* is a welcome contribution to the growing field of recorded sound history. Since the early 2000s, alternative narratives to the top-down and linear accounts of inventors and major phonographic companies, and the conception of recording as a socio-technical practice rather than a transparent technology (a mere ‘inscription’ of sound), have gained in importance. By bringing together contributions from historians, musicologists and cultural and media theorists, this opus furthers the deconstruction of diffusionist, essentialist and Western-centric narratives, and frames a study programme attentive to materialities, ‘ordinary’ agents, margins, transfers, negotiations, improvisations and diversions. This process highlights entanglements between technologies and social, political, economic and legal issues.

The book is deployed in four parts, respectively devoted to the agents and spaces of production, listening practices and their aesthetics, ideologies involved in the uses of recorded sound, and the social geography of consumption.

The contributions in Part 1 highlight practices and the roles of agents overlooked by mainstream history. They focus on how the temporal and spatial trajectories of these agents, as well as their cultural representations and social interactions, shaped early recordings and the organisation of the phonographic industry. Sergio Ospina Romero’s contribution on the scouts sent by Victor and Columbia to make ‘ethnic’ or ‘foreign’ recordings fascinatingly reverses the usual narrative, insisting on improvisation and negotiation at the heart of an activity that had to perform the convergence of Western cultural representations, technical and commercial requirements, and practices and dispositions that did not fit in with the planned arrangements. Multiple externalities (linguistic, social, material) dynamically shaped the categories and the very organisation of the phonographic market. More focused on the symbolic aspects of the interactions between settlers and colonised, Henry Reese’s contribution, entitled ‘Settler colonial soundscapes: phonograph demonstrations in 1890s Australia’, offers a compelling analysis of how sounds recorded and offered for public listening by transnational agents of the phonographic industry contributed to a sense of ‘British’ community: a sound perceived as ‘one’s own’ (e.g. bells, political speeches in English), shared by peers, which muted indigenous sounds and voices, and redefined the local through the categories of modernity, urbanity, mobility and entertainment culture.

The second part examines ‘how the circulation of imported phonographic commodities challenged or altered auditory and performance practices in selected regional and national contexts, but also in new spaces (such as the domestic or intimate environments of the house and the private listening club) and countries which


have generally been marginalised (Portugal, Spain and Sweden)' (p. 8). Thematically and methodically less original, this section would have been strengthened by being put into perspective with previous publications, in order to compare those national specificities, circulations and adaptations of practices and cultural referents.

The third part focuses on the discourses surrounding phonography in order to understand their place in the ideological issues of the twentieth century. Benedetta Zucconi's article exposes the opposition between two groups of agents in 1930s Italy: Crocian-inspired neo-idealists – composers, music critics and intellectuals – who considered phonography incompatible with art because of its 'mechanical' and industrial dimension, and the community of jurists who, around the issue of copyright (and hence through their attention to the intervention not only of performers, but also of sound engineers), contributed to the recognition of its 'medial nature' (p. 165). While this analysis of lawyers' contribution to the structuring of phonography is interesting, one is less convinced by the argument of the specifically Italian character of this phenomenon. Indeed, similar controversies existed in neighbouring countries, where distrust for 'mechanical music' and 'mass culture' was countered by the valorisation of the latter as 'art' (discographic criticism, prizes) (Maisonneuve 2009). Thus, placing this analysis in a transnational framework would allow the author to nuance her statements and further contribute to the deconstruction of mainstream historiographic categories announced in the introduction. Britta Lange's contribution on 'The construction of "das Volk" through acoustic knowledge. Recordings of "ethnic German repatriates" from the Institute for Acoustic Research, 1940–1941' are also very interesting. The author convincingly brings to light the interweaving of science and politics in the context of the Nazi state, both through the political instrumentalisation of science to legitimise the *Lebensraum* project and through the scientists' use of the political context to obtain grants and escape conscription. Thus, Lange highlights how the recording activity forges sonic evidence of the Germanness of a dispersed people, supporting their integration into an expansionist empire. This effective and rich demonstration would, however, have benefited from being embedded in the older history of the relationship between music and nationalism (Bohlman 2004).

Finally, the fourth part focuses on the places and spaces of music purchase, and on the often marginalised traders and consumers who contribute to creating a new culture (see the excellent contribution by J. Martin Vest on the shop windows of The Victor Talking Machine Company). Through his analysis of the networks of the Italian opera recording trade in Philadelphia's Little Italy of the 1900s to the 1920s, Siel Agugliaro highlights the polycentric and reticular character of a transnational phonographic market, undergirded by issues of legitimacy, solidarity and visibility, far from the smooth and linear narratives of the dominant historiography: negotiation, hybridisation and margins are core to the development of multiple markets, at once singular and global. This attention to marginal and little visible practices is further embodied in the inclusion of hitherto little-exploited corpora: oral testimonies, paraphernalia, often discarded because they are not indexed or systematically preserved by institutions. This reveals the singular research of passionate collectors like Thomas Henry, who have built their corpus over several years and called on fan communities. In this respect, it is worth stressing the consistency of this editorial project and its polycentric historiography, making space for non-institutionalised and new corpora, also welcoming authors on the margins of the academy. Overall then, this book not only historicises 'the record' as a commodity

distributed and consumed, but also as a complex object that is constantly invented, used, discussed and brought to life.

Original and ambitious, rich in its diversity of perspectives and objects, this edited volume constitutes an undeniable contribution to the historiography of recorded sound. However, given the global ambition of this industry, more dialogue with previous works could provide information on the national or local specificities of certain developments as well as on their links with other territories and situations. Such perspectives would also point out the resistance to such dynamics, and the scales of circulation, transformation and negotiation that brought together ideas, objects, agents and practices in the early years of sound recording. One may also regret the sometimes list-like effect of certain fashionable concepts such as intersectionality, empire, colonialism, gender, multimediality or mobility, which appear more programmatic than necessary. Nonetheless, these reservations are only a call to continue the good work along the lines outlined in this stimulating volume.

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## References

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***Record Cultures: The Transformation of the U.S. Recording Industry.* By Kyle Barnett. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020. 320 pp. ISBN 978-0-472-03877-0.**

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*Record Cultures* focuses on the development of the US recording industry during the pivotal 1920-1935 years, marked by a series of industrial, sociocultural and economic changes. Barnett deftly translates the dynamism of a diverse, largely experimental and unsettled industrial environment – illuminating the professional and personal lives of those connected to it (from talent scouts through to record labels' owners, recording artists, radio hosts and listeners). Among its many themes and histories, the book retraces the energetic flourishing of independent record companies in the 1920s; the rush to capture and commoditise previously unrecorded vernacular music; the development of listening practices across media platforms; and the impact of the Great Depression on the organisation of the US recording industry. This multifaceted study draws from 'classic' cultural histories of the phonograph in the US (Read and Welch 1959; Gelatt 1977) as well as from more contemporary analyses (Kenney 1999; Sterne 2003; Suisman 2009). Rather than replicating their contents, however, the book subtly modulates existing accounts through its reliance on extensive archival research (the author notably visited the Starr-Gennett Foundation and the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound of