

Urns of the Opera : Was a Phantom there?

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December 24th 1907, Alfred Clark, head of Gramophone French Society, deposits, during a solemn ceremony in the basement of Paris Opera 24 discs considered as the beginning of a 'museum of voices'. In front of the audience, the phonograms are carefully surrounded by strips and then placed into two leaden urns hermetically sealed. A vacuum is created in the containers, and then the opening is blocked up. By written act, Aristide Briand, minister of public instruction, registers Alfred Clark's will: these boxes shall be opened only hundred years later, in order to teach the men of this time: 1° what was then the state of talking machines, yet today almost at their beginnings, and above all what progress will have improved this precious invention during a century; 2° what was then the voice of the major singers of our time and what interpretation they gave to some of the most famous pieces of the lyrical and dramatic repertoire. In June 1912, a second deposit is done by Alfred Clark, again of two dozens of records, and a gramophone, placed in a biggest urn, guarantees that it will be possible to play again the records in spite of technological changes which will occur meantime. After work done in 1989 at the Opera, the 'vault' is opened and urns confided to the French National Library. Two of them (the one with the gramophone and one 1912 deposit) had been plundered. 1907 records remain safe. This time capsule is at once a scientific experiment unique of its kind and also modern and archaic fantasy. The operation, incontestably promotional, is fed by modern notions and extraordinary lucid intuitions: ideology of recording techniques' progress, metaphor of voices canned and prediction of reading machines' obsolescence. Nevertheless, this bet on modernity is combined to a fantasy of secret and funeral: living voices in a vault, mummification in obscure catacombs (the other side of Garnier building). The records contribute to the myth of a Paris underneath (cf. Gaston Leroux, *The Phantom of the Opera*, 1910). A public opening of the urns was planned in December 2007 but in May, we learnt the strips were composed of asbestos, which singularly complicated our task. In December, there is a public commemoration but it's only in September 2008 that two urns have been opened by a restorer, in a confined area, under supervision of a society specialized in asbestos removal. A report as complete as possible has been done: records appearance, chemical analysis of records and strips, digitisation, listening. On December 8th and 9th 2008 in Paris, a colloquium, which tried to answer to the donator's will, examined the urns' story, the reading technologies and the phonographic production in a historical perspective. At last, EMI published in February 2009 a 3 CD casket with all the pieces of music contained in the four urns. My paper will describe mainly the historical and technical aspects of the operations in 1907, 1912 and 2008.