

78 rpm records in the 21st century: "Resurrection" or a second "new life"?

Nikos Dionisopoulos, Institute for Research on Music & Acoustics, Athens, Greece

With the invention of gramophone, for the first time the sound (therefore music) is engraved in a medium and can be reproduced many times. Thus, the discography enters from the beginning of the 20th century vigorously in the field of music experience and entertainment, substituting in many cases the live performance and putting new aspects on the transmission of music experience and knowledge from one generation to the other.

During the first decades of gramophone, discography, in the case of traditional music, gets its prime material from the existing collective memory. These very first recordings, through the diffusion of records, exert a strong influence and forge the aesthetic criteria of the local repertoires. Many traditional tunes and songs return back to where they first started, creating a second generation of oral tradition. Thus, often in the post-war period, field researchers are recording as 'authentic', songs that were heard by the performers from the gramophone. Therefore we believe that 78 rpm discography needs to be considered more carefully by the researchers, academics and publishers, given its grave importance for the evolution of tradition.

In the same sense, the 78rpm collection are of major value archives, since they retain the oldest audio material in history, and should be considered as an important part not only of national, but of world's audio heritage. At the same time they present the greatest resistance to the deterioration of time (as opposed to CD's, DAT etc).

The republication of 78rpm records in our days, is putting a series of questions, in technological and methodological level. a) The aesthetic of the today music consumer sets new standards to the offered sound quality. The congenital noises of the 78rpm records are not any more accepted on the today music products, so the denoising is, in any case, necessary. But the evolution of technology offers us much more utilities in the way that the "resurrection" of discography has much better quality as the original. Here a series of audio processing and crucial decisions (such as level of denoising, timbre improvement, reproduction speed etc) can give different results, while the use of technology can transform the sound engineer to an "apprentice wizard". [During the presentation several audio examples will be given, in order to be documented the specific restoration cases]. b) In the level of methodological and scientific research, the compilation of 78rpm archives, in the perspective of publication needs a multifarious and complex approach. Arising issues of musical historiography, archival practices (storage, cataloging) needing top technology standards (digitization, mechanical and digital cleaning, restoration) historical and social documentation (eg. Discography of emigrants in USA in the beginning of 20th century).