

THE CATALOGUES OF RECORDS

COMPANIES OF EARLY 20TH

CENTURY

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Abstract

Grey literature often contains documents such as publisher or corporate catalogues. Included among these are catalogues of record label companies, which provide evidence of all the sound documents issued for sale. Recordings are part of the collections of many institutions, but few of them also own these secondary information resources. Therefore, they are not able to contribute to the overall view of the cultural heritage of the era when the sound industry began and developed rapidly.

Keywords

Record Label Companies, Publishers' Catalogues, 20th Century, Discography, Audio Documents

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Introduction

The introduction to an article on grey literature would - in most cases - begin in a similar fashion, namely with an explanation of the term 'grey literature' itself. Therefore, before the actual text of our article, we have decided to highlight three perspectives associated with the term 'grey literature'. We will intentionally sort them by creation date. We will deliberately try to put these three resources in a single location, as it is important to understand that even though we know or come across the term 'grey literature', in the 20th and 21st Centuries there is no institution here with any connection to the issue of audio documents, respectively the catalogues of gramophone companies.

1993 – Czech Terminology Database of Library and Information Science (TDKIV)

Documents that are not published in the usual manner and are therefore not available on the regular book market (e.g. theses and dissertations, research reports, internal documents, official publications, etc.) There are specialised information systems (e.g. the SIGLE database)¹ for searches and distribution of grey literature.

2006 - Grey literature in the Internet age

Both the concept and the content of the theme of 'grey literature' are rather ambiguous. Exhaustively defining grey literature is not easy to do, and a general description of this literature is preferred. Most commonly it is described using the statement that it is "publications that are not available through normal bookstore sources and methods". It is also often labelled 'unconventional' or 'half-published' literature.²

2008 – Grey literature

Grey literature, or unpublished or half-published literature, is information produced at all levels of government, academic, business and industrial institutions in both electronic and printed form, not having undergone the standard publishing process and not distributed in the standard sales networks, i.e. issued by institutions whose main activity is not publishing.³

¹ MATUŠÍK, Zdeněk. Grey literature. In: *KTD: Czech Terminology Database of Library and Information Science (TDKIV)* [online]. Prague: National Library of the Czech Republic, 2003- [cit. 2016-08-15]. Available from: http://aleph.nkp.cz/F/?func=direct&doc_number=000001056&local_base=KTD.

² MYŠKOVÁ, Petra. Grey literature in the Internet age. In: *Contemporary Libraries 2006*. Brno: Czech Association of Libraries, 2006. p. 279-284. ISBN 80-86249-41-7. Available from: <http://www.sdruk.cz/sdruk/publikacni-cinnost/clanek/knihovny-soucasnosti-2006-sbornik>.

³ Šedá literatura. *Národní technická knihovna* [online]. Prague: NTK, 2008 [cit. 2016-09-13]. Available from: <https://www.techlib.cz/cs/2947-seda-literatura>.

Regarding the above terms, for our purpose it is important to mention that they do not explicitly define texts related to audio documents, meaning they do not include the catalogues of gramophone companies, sources of discographic data that should be retained just like university works, etc. If we combine this with the fact that here there is no institution that manages these historic documents, we come to the question of whether we should be drawing attention to this problem through the only possible solution: namely that we explain in detail what these catalogues were used for, what is found in them, and localise their incidence primarily outside cultural heritage institutions. In our case, this means contacting private collectors and attempting to rescue these often even primary and unique resources for the creation of discographic works.

When examining the history of an audio recording and completing data about existing audio recordings, researchers ideally want all the data carriers in question physically available, in our case phonograph cylinders and shellac discs. Such an ideal case cannot of course ever exist, as the release of audio recordings – especially in the early history of audio recording – was an activity that lacked any global, let alone regional, coordination, nor could it have been coordinated. The activities took place exclusively according to the law of supply and demand, the financial strength of the individual producers and, last but not least, the potential purchasing power of the target market for which the carriers in question were intended. The record books of sometimes already long-disappeared gramophone companies were usually not preserved, whether because of changes in political regime, wars, or frequent changes of ownership in the firms themselves. Similarly, the sales catalogues of former gramophone companies were rarely preserved, even if they are practically the only sources – and in addition often rather unreliable – enabling knowledge of our cultural past, as reflected – even if often in a markedly distorted fashion – precisely through historical audio recordings. Catalogues and lists of historic phonograph cylinders and gramophone records, once a worthless single-use commodity, are today an indispensable tool for compiling discographies of individual performers or compiling an inventory of the overall production of a given gramophone company in a given time period.

The strengths and weaknesses of using company catalogues and other promotional materials can be illustrated through the example of compiling the first comprehensive discographic publication on recordings on gramophone records of the Czechoslovak gramophone company Esta, active from 1930 to 1946. The two most important pieces of data needed to determine the exact date of a recording are provided primarily by the matrix and secondarily by the order number. Both these numbers are usually furnished with various prefixes and suffixes, knowledge of which also helps us identify the recording technique, whether it is an initial or subsequent recording, the number of the pressing machine, and the price category for the resulting recordings. If we do not have physical moulding of the record in question, from which these data can be read, we can only work with the order number under which the recording was placed in the catalogue – if, of course, it has been preserved. The order numbers of records were usually published in ascending order. In the case of Esta records, however, they were added at random, due inter alia to irrational decisions taken by the various managers responsible for the creation of the repertoire at different times. In order to successfully compile a discography of this company, we were therefore forced to work both with as many actually existing records as possible, and also with all available catalogues and other promotional materials from Esta, while at the same time gradually eliminating the numerous demonstrable errors that these materials contain.

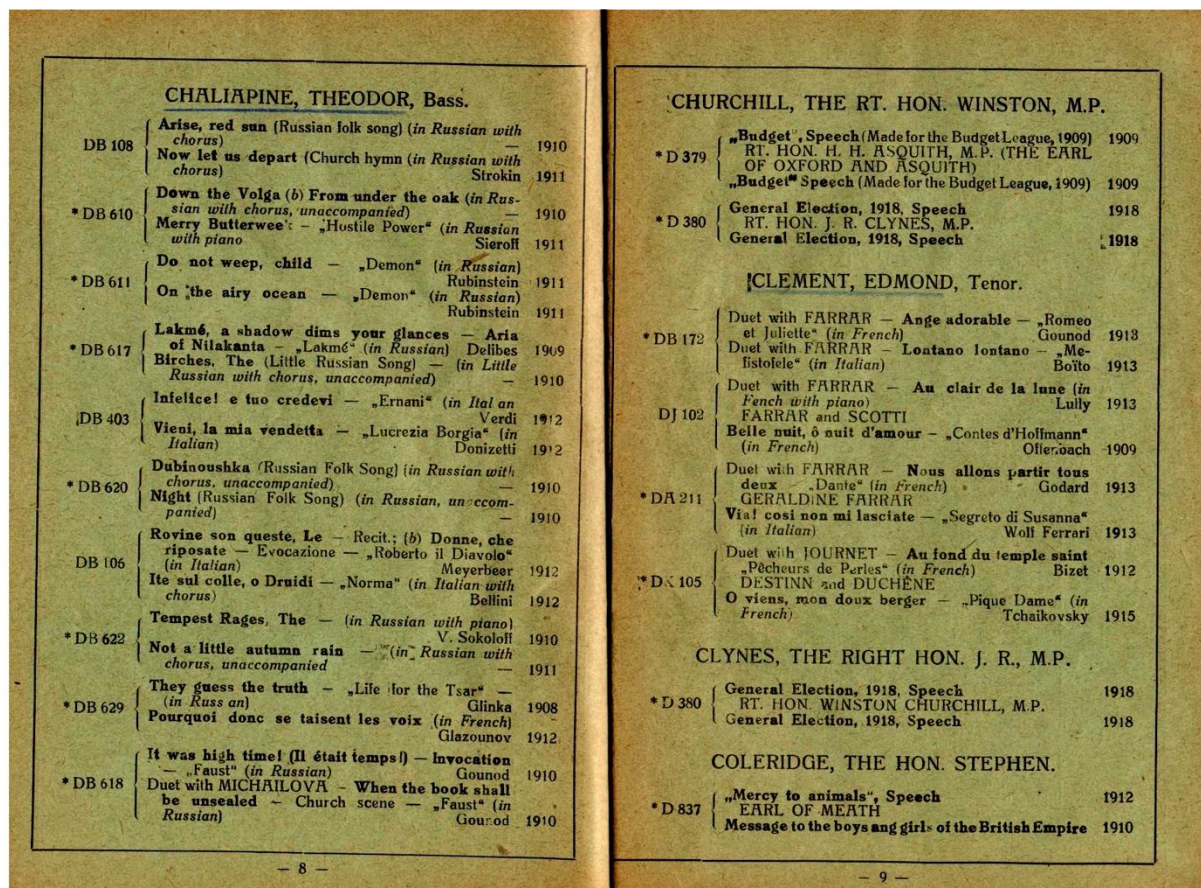


Figure 1: Example of His Master's Voices records catalogue from 1927

So much for the example of using company catalogues in current discographic practice. Information about the first commercial audio carriers appeared through such catalogues concurrently with the placement of these audio carriers on the market. The large American company Columbia Phonograph Co. published its first catalogue of phonograph cylinders in 1891 – it contained a list of about 200 recordings. Two years later, this company's catalogue already had 32 pages. The first catalogue of recordings on gramophone records was issued around 1892 by the London-based company Parkins & Gotto, which imported, inter alia, the first gramophones and records of their inventor Emile Berliner to England. This catalogue comprised a strip of paper measuring around 20x12 cm – one side depicted gramophones with handles or “talking machines” accompanied by the following text: “This cheerful curiosity can bring endless joy to children of all ages. We have the pleasure to introduce to you a recital of the poem Shine, Star, Shine in a voice so comic that all you can do is laugh.” If, however, the listener was actually induced to laugh at anything, it was primarily the strong German accent of the English spoken by Mr Berliner, who personally recited favourite American children's rhymes on his invention – meaning on gramophone records. Descriptive colour catalogues were issued in the USA at the end of the 19th Century by Gianni Bettini, a producer of today very rare phonograph cylinders with recordings of international opera stars. Every gramophone company that wanted to remain on the market paid great attention to the publication of catalogues of their recordings from the start of the 20th Century. These catalogues took different forms – from a simple sheet of paper with a list of several of the most popular songs through to carefully coloured hardback publications, presenting – in addition to an exhaustive list of all the company's released recordings – their other products as well, such as gramophones and their parts, but also many other, often curious additions: brushes for

cleaning the records, small oil containers with a special oil for lubricating the spring movements of the gramophones, petroleum solutions for removing the recording from wax cylinders (so they could be recorded on again), various scissors or tools for sharpening bamboo or steel needles, several types of needle packaging for differing reproduction volume, tools for establishing the gramophone turntable speed, etc. Even if such catalogues were issued mainly in the years before World War One, and many in huge quantities, only very few of the oldest ones have been preserved.

And what was the situation like in this country? The first ever discovered list of Czech recordings on phonograph cylinders and gramophone records is contained in a relatively extensive catalogue from the wholesaler Bial & Freund based in Wroclaw (then Breslau), issued in the autumn of 1901. In addition to hundreds of recordings from its international repertoire, it also presented over two dozen “Böhmische Gesänge” [Bohemian Songs] performed by anonymous interpreters. Discographic research has so far succeeded in identifying around half of these recordings – they were phonograph cylinders from a German branch of the American Columbia recorded in Berlin by tenor Otakar Mařák and soprano Josefina Krausová. A certain Siegfried Adler has been identified as another Czech singer, of whom unfortunately history leaves us no trace.

The oldest discovered catalogue of Czech recordings on gramophone records from the then largest gramophone company in the world, The Gramophone Co. Ltd., boasting the colour picture of Nipper the dog on the cover, dates from 1909, and in 30 pages provides primarily a list of recordings from Czech opera singers, including their photographs. More Czech catalogues from this company were released four times a year from 1911. They usually had around one hundred A5-format pages and presented, in addition to hundreds of Czech songs, also thousands of recordings from its international repertoire, which anybody interested could order from one of its authorised importers of records from the English parent company. Until 1915, moreover, two-page leaflets with lists of the latest news from Czech interpreters on records from the parent company were released every month as a rule. This practice was stopped in 1915, as during World War One the British Gramophone Company – as well as other gramophone companies of the time – did not record any new Czech songs. In the post-war period, the activity of the company was renewed in 1921, when Karel Hařler was appointed director of its Czechoslovak branch. From that year, relatively extensive catalogues of the records from this brand were released in Czech every year, showing thousands of songs from its international repertoire. New releases usually contained a warning that the current list cancelled all earlier releases. In 1930, for example, such a A5-format list contained over 300 pages. Moreover, until 1939, the Czechoslovak branch of the Gramophone Company was engaged in such publishing, releasing in this country primarily records from the His Master’s Voice and Columbia brands, and also as a rule monthly leaflets with several pages informing about news in the repertoires of this brand’s recordings.

From 1905, the large French company Pathé produced a Czech programme on phonograph cylinders, and later also on records. Pathé recorded such songs until 1908 in Vienna with Czech artists with long-term engagements at the local theatres or opera houses. This is one of the reasons why some of them no longer recorded any songs for other gramophone companies present on the Czech markets, which did not record Czech programmes outside the Czech lands. The Pathé phonograph cylinder catalogue from 1906 also shows several Czech songs performed by a certain Bronislawa Wolske, a soprano probably of Polish origin. The last discovered catalogue of recordings from this company dates from 1912, while after

the war Pathé did not reopen its offices in the Czechoslovak Republic. Another large foreign company with an extensive Czech repertoire was the Anglo-German-Italian International Talking Machine Record, which in 1904 was the first company in the world to release double-sided records under the Odeon brand. The catalogues of Czech recordings on such records brought new items four times a year, while for distributors of records and gramophones of this and other brands of the German parent Lindström, a company quarterly entitled “Lindström zpravodaj” was moreover already published in Czech from 1902.

Various periodicals or irregularly issued printed products from diverse wholesalers, usually posing as “exclusive” or “general” representatives of some of the large foreign companies present on the Czech or Moravian market, are also of interest to researchers. Prague wholesaler Josef Vrba issued relatively informative catalogues every year on glossy paper, featuring many photographs. In addition to a list of phonograph cylinders and gramophone records from various producers, they also provided an extensive range of parts for gramophones and phonographs, including a range of other accessories for storing or transporting phonograph cylinders and gramophone records. The Brno-based company Jarušek & spol. even issued the large-format periodical Jaruškovy besedy containing a series of educational articles on the theme of reproduced music, and lists of phonograph cylinders and gramophone records with recordings by foreign interpreters, which this company exported all the way to Bosnia, for example. Such printed materials often contained false advertising, incorrect data and denigration of the competition. Hence, for example, the company Josef Kukla asserted in advertisement that its “new double-sided Mozart disks last twice as long as other disks” – in fact they were fire-sale disks of the Lyrophon brand with a neutral label to which Mr Kukla merely attached his own paper label. Often, for example, the fact that the store in question was “Czech and Christian” (Landiš, Prague) was emphasised on such leaflets, or they encouraged potential interested parties to consider why they should “support Jewish traders from Vienna or Kraków when we have a good domestic factory?” (Jarušek, Brno).

The catalogues and lists that the producers delivered directly to their sellers, or that were printed out by the domestic representatives of the company in question, are in principle the most useful research tools. The most important data they contained was the order numbers of the records, data about the interpreter, and the names of the songs. Until the end of the era of mechanical disk recording – meaning until around the end of the 1920s – Czech catalogues of records of the German company Homokord also presented the matrix numbers of the individual recordings. These are something like the birth certificate number of each recording, using which it is also usually possible to deduce the exact date of the recording itself. The opening pages of the company catalogues also usually presented the principles of the labelling of the records – in the case of HMV labels, for example, the prefix AN for the order number was used for records 30 cm in diameter, and AM for records 25 cm in diameter. The form of the prefix was also determined by the retail price of the record, and in addition the colour of the label usually reflected the price category of the record. The retail price of HMV records 30 cm in diameter with a regular garnet colour label was CZK 22.50 in the mid-1930s, while more valuable recordings by foreign interpreters used a black label (CZK 28), and the most expensive records had a white label and sold for CZK 80.

As regards the arrangement of the individual musical genres in the record catalogues, from the very start the practice was basic division into orchestral and song pieces. The orchestral pieces were further divided into marches, waltzes, polkas, mazurkas, hymns, concert and characterful pieces, folk dances, symphonic music, operas, operettas and modern dance.

These were further split, for example, into foxtrots, tangos, Charlestons and other kinds of dances. The songs were split into recordings of tenors, sopranos, duets and choirs. Instrumentals were classified by instruments, and usually began with solo violins and piano pieces through to the once popular zithers, xylophones, piccolos and horns. Other sections presented humorous pieces, fairy tales and Christmas pieces.

The catalogues of gramophone records were usually offered to regular customers of a company free of charge at stores. In the case of the sending of records by post with cash on delivery, which was common at the time, each consignment contained a certain minimum number of records supplemented with the latest company catalogue and other promotional materials. From the end of the 1920s, gramophone companies began – in addition to regularly published catalogues of new items and accessories – to also issue various thematic publications focusing, for example, on recordings of opera and symphonic music, film music, fairy tales for children, etc. The frequency of the release of promotional materials also increased: for example, from the mid-1930s, Esta was already publishing multiple-page leaflets presenting new items every month. As regards the print runs of such materials, this depended mainly on the number of distribution stores for the gramophone records of the company in question, which understandably had to have a reasonable amount of them available for their customers. The gramophone records of some brands were sold exclusively in a few stores in the republic – for example, in 1933, Dixi records were only sold in the Czechoslovak Republic through less than ten Je-Pa stores, and between 1935 and 1937, Pallas records could only be purchased in Prague at two company stores. At the end of the 1930s, on the other hand, Esta records were sold through at least one hundred stores throughout the republic, and we can assume that Ultraphon, the largest gramophone company at the time, distributed its records to a much larger number of sales outlets.

More serious wholesalers usually retained the original order numbers for offered records of the respective labels in their catalogues, and so the reconstruction of the whole output of the company is thus relatively easy. Usually, however, in their catalogues, dealers presented their own order numbers under which they offered records from various producers. Such catalogues are unusable for research, as they usually do not allow the identification of a recording. For example, the largest Prague wholesaler, Jan Kettner, whose catalogues are paradoxically quite common, was known for this practice. Other complications for researchers are the frequent (at the time) changes in ownership, capital transfers and mergers of record producers into concerns, when a new owner began to re-press older recordings from the output of a company that had since disappeared on a newly introduced label, and even sometimes under different song titles, and/or with different names of interpreters or composers, different names of the accompanying orchestras and, in addition, in different combinations on both sides of the record. In its new promotional materials, a new publisher also sometimes used the company figurative mark of the original publisher, in which it replaced for example only the name of the original label with a new one. The catalogues of such records are then a highly dubious and confusing contribution to the work of a researcher, or for compiling the discographies of the individual gramophone companies.

The authors of the offered songs were only indicated in catalogues in relatively rare cases in the years before World War One. They began to be indicated more consistently only after 1918, when Czechoslovakia acceded to the principles of copyright law. The payment of royalties for the use of musical works by the press, or their publication on an audio carrier, began to be monitored in the 1920s by various organisations like OSA and AMMRE. From the

new editions of the catalogues of some companies, we can also see adjustments resulting from the changes in the political situation: so, for example, the same recordings of military wind music labelled in 1914 as “Imperial and Royal Infantry Regiment No 28” were after 1918 labelled as recordings of the “Music of Czechoslovakian Infantry Regiment No 28”. The First Republic’s “Music of the 5th T. G. Masaryk Regiment” became during the protectorate “Music of the Government Troops” and the names had to disappear from the titles of various compositions dedicated to First Republic politicians when re-released. In addition, after 1945, the catalogues of gramophone records usually contained forewords justifying the exclusion of “unsuitable” older recordings that had been “subject to revision from artistic and technical points of view and, if needed, replaced with new pieces...” – meaning undoubtedly “more politically correct”, as we would say today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us only add that today, the catalogues of historic gramophone records, similarly to brochures and other informational materials from the former gramophone companies, represent not only valuable sources of information for every researcher, but also amusing insights into the past. The mentioned catalogues, as part of grey literature, rank among the important sources of information and attention should be paid to them, as they are primarily publications providing information about recordings that make up part of our musical cultural heritage. The effective registration of audio grey literature and its comprehensive monitoring are important – the question thus arises as to whether the solution is the systematic collection of historic documents and their protection and preservation in digital form in the National Repository of Grey Literature (NRGL).

References

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