



Project Document Cover Sheet

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JISC Final Report (*Public Report*)

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Executive Summary

'Musicians of Britain and Ireland, 1900-1950' has digitised over 2000 recordings from the archive of 78rpm discs at King's College London. The discs were chosen to highlight world-class British and Irish performers whose recordings formed the backbone of the record business in the 1920s and 30s yet were gradually deleted and forgotten after the merger that formed EMI in 1931. The new company focused instead on performers from mainland Europe and the USA, in order to maximise international sales, and one result was that locally-trained musicians were increasingly perceived as having a lower status. The same attitude persisted until the 1980s and 90s, when a young generation of British musicians, now using 'original instruments', became market leaders in classical music recording once again. MBI's aim was to revive the lost recordings of those pre-War musicians so as to give modern listeners and researchers the chance to reassess the excellence of musical performance in and around British Isles during the 78 era.

Recordings to digitise were chosen by an expert panel, led by BBC radio producer, PhD student and record enthusiast Nick Morgan, with David Patmore (research fellow at Sheffield University) whose research originally uncovered the story of the forgotten musicians, and the distinguished author and critic John Steane of *Gramophone* magazine. The records were digitised, using the latest equipment and computer software in the sound studios at King's College London, by sound engineers Andrew Hallifax and Martin Haskell. The online search interface, which gives access to all the MBI recordings as well as nearly 3000 digitised under a related digitisation project called CHARM (Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music), was designed and implemented by King's College's Centre for Computing in the Humanities.

By making so many recordings available once again, MBI aims to make possible a major reassessment of the history of musical performance in Britain, and to enable new research into the ways in which business decisions by record companies can profoundly change public perceptions of musical excellence.

The recordings are available for free streaming as MP3s or for download using the higher-quality FLAC format. All include details of music and performers, encoded in the sound file tags, which will display automatically on all types of personal media players. And there's a sophisticated web-based search facility enabling users to see what's there and choose what they want. For access go to www.charm.kcl.ac.uk/sound/sound.html.

The project leader was Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, Professor of Music at King's College London: daniel.leech-wilkinson@kcl.ac.uk.

Background

The Department of Music at King's College London has for some years been a centre for research into musical performance, and especially performance documented by recordings. Supporting its work is the King's Sound Archive, a collection of some 150,000 78rpm shellac discs covering much of the output of the main UK companies from ca.1900-1955. The AHRC Research Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music (CHARM, 2004-09, www.charm.kcl.ac.uk) included a major discographical and transfer project generating (among other things) a library of free downloadable sound files, transferred in a professionally equipped studio at King's from 78rpm discs in the archive. In the process, together with our partners in the King's College Centre for Computing in the Humanities (CCH), we set new standards for the integration of discography, sound files and metadata, the latter covering both content and transfer technique. And we built up valuable expertise in all aspects of the handling, playing, transfer and documentation of early recordings.

At the same time, CHARM research undertaken by David Patmore (Sheffield University) revealed the effect on public perception of a new A&R policy devised at the time of the merger of the Gramophone Company and Columbia to form EMI in 1931. (For more detail see www.charm.kcl.ac.uk/projects/p2_4.html.) Until then the two companies had built up large rosters of British and some Irish artists who provided many of the performances in their catalogues. The work of Continental and US musicians was also well represented, but the core output of both companies depended on outstanding local talent. Very high standards were achieved, and many performances issued, in the 1910s and 20s especially, were the equal of any available at the time. A key factor was the competition for artists and sales between the largest companies operating in the UK, the Gramophone Co. and Columbia, which led to a rapid expansion in the catalogues of each company, creating a market for classical music that had never existed before.

The merger to create EMI had a dramatic effect. Competition ceased and a virtual monopoly was created. Coupled with the effects of the Depression, this led to a sharp 'rationalisation' of the catalogue, cutting out many of the local artists, including conductors and performers whom recording had made into household names (Cameron, Coates, Lambert, Long, Radford, Ronald, Sammons, Samuel, and many more), and promoting instead Continental performers who could be guaranteed to sell in all territories, at the same time invoking the cachet of those Central European areas associated with the great composers of music history. Only a handful---notably Barbirolli, Beecham, McCormack, Sargent---survived, and even those only with limited promotion abroad. Only Solomon and Stokowski could be considered truly international stars.

This radical change of policy had a profound effect on the public perception of music thereafter, an effect that continued after World War II with the assumption among promoters, record companies and the public that musicians from abroad were likely to be more able and more profound than those home-grown. From a research point of view this is a fascinating phenomenon: with the recordings once more available, future research projects will be in a better position to explore the extent and nature of this effect.

The first priority, however, and the purpose of MBI, was to recover a substantial sample of the recordings by the most admired British and Irish artists who were dropped from the company

catalogues during the 1930s and 40s. Their work covers the full range of repertoire, from Italian operatic arias to Austro-German symphonies, and so it can be studied in many of the genres associated with Continental stars. It has appeared hardly at all in modern CD or download reissues, the main exceptions being recordings in which Continental musicians figure prominently.

Aims and Objectives

The principal underlying aims of 'Musicians of Britain and Ireland, 1900-1950' were 1) to bring to public and scholarly notice a body of performances that has been largely invisible for more than half a century, and 2) to enable subsequent research into the consequences of record company A&R (artists & repertoire) policies on the public understanding of music.

MBI's principal objective was to enhance and extend the CHARM collection of downloadable music recordings, focusing on the work of performers native to or principally recording in the UK and Ireland who had been prominent in the UK record catalogues before the Second World War but whose work had fallen out of the catalogues by the start of the LP era. This was achieved by transferring from 78rpm discs, to the highest professional standards, some 2100 items chosen by an expert panel with the support of the community of specialist users, and to make these recordings available for free, unrestricted, online listening and download.

The aims and objectives remained unchanged throughout the period of the project, and will be realised as the recordings made available by MBI are heard and studied.

Methodology

Discs for digitisation were chosen from the King's Sound Archive by the specialist advisors David Patmore and (especially) Nick Morgan, joined during the project by author and critic John Steane who brought unique expertise in vocal recordings. Further suggestions were made by the Principal- and Co-Investigators and by other members of the Management Committee (especially Roger Beardsley and Timothy Day). An initial list of 1500 items was published at the start of the project via Google Docs, and members of the user community were invited, via the subject e-lists Mus-Perf-Rec and 78-L, to comment and make other suggestions. The initial list was sufficiently long that, when extended with suggestions made by others, especially John Steane's suggestions for further vocal items, it already exceeded the quantity we would have time to digitise. And therefore we did not go on to publish a second list as had originally been envisaged.

The procedure for digitisation and storing metadata was that established for the CHARM transfer project, operated successfully for 18 months previously. It is described in detail for a lay readership at <www.charm.kcl.ac.uk/history/p20_4_4_1.html>.

The project aimed to exclude performances that were already easily available on CD or online and items planned for the BLSA Archival Sound Recording project. In the event a small number of recordings we digitised have since appeared elsewhere, which is probably to be expected, but most appear via MBI for the first time since their original issue on 78s. A small number of recordings whose works remain in copyright were included where the recordings were of exceptional historical or musical significance, and permissions obtained.

Metadata consisted of all the information appearing on the original disc labels, plus dates derived from published discographies and other information accessible through the historical catalogue holdings of CHARM at King's College, supported by JPG photos of the disc labels, all of which will be accessible via the user interface. As well as being stored in a database for access via the CHARM/MBI sound file search interface, detailed metadata are also included in the tags attached to the FLAC sound files so that they display on hardware and software personal media players.

The CHARM/MBI sound file search interface (www.charm.kcl.ac.uk/sound/sound.html) will allow users to narrow down search criteria via a series of browse columns, leading to the full data record and a

link to the sound file and label photo. Sound files are offered as streamed MP3s and as downloadable FLACs.

Implementation

Equipment for a second transfer studio was ordered in advance of the project start. The first sound engineer post was advertised in September and appointed at the start of October and began work on 13 October 2008. Permission was granted to continue the project into October 2009 in order to get the maximum amount of work done. (In the event, underspend on salaries enabled the transfer work to continue through November 2009, increasing the total number of items available.) A first list of items proposed for digitisation was drawn up and circulated, as described above, and positive feedback was received. Thereafter the project was extremely simple to run, since it consisted very largely of continuing to make digital transfers from 78s according to the standards and practices established and already operated under the CHARM transfer project, whose sound engineer worked in the same suite of rooms and so was continually on hand for consultation. After six months, when the CHARM project ended, he joined MBI as the second transfer engineer. No significant problems were encountered with the digitisations which continued until the last day of the project.

Metadata was initially entered using an online interface designed by CCH, but as this did not at first permit editing of errors the sound engineers also recorded the data in an Excel spreadsheet. This proved to be a better approach, and in due course online entry was abandoned. Using the invaluable free software Exceltagger (<http://www.willyhoops.com/exceltagger.htm>) it proved easy to convert the Excel data into FLAC tags and to add them to the sound files. All this metadata preparation was done by the sound engineers as they went along, with a final tidying-up phase at the end of the project extension in order to separate out much more of the performer, arranger and work metadata into separate fields. The end result was a much more refined database, allowing much finer searching, than had originally been envisaged.

Rather than use the existing CHARM discographical search interface, it was agreed with CCH, following experimentation with the open source sound file player Songbird in particular, that they would build a web-based interface with similar useability. This was still under construction at CCH at the end of the transfer project, and is being tested as this report is being submitted, but its going live should mark a significant advance in useability for searching online sound (and other) libraries.

Outputs and Results

The search interface will provide access to some 2100 recordings of performances by British and Irish musicians made between 1900 and 1950, together with the 2700 recordings generated by the preceding CHARM transfer project which covered musicians from the UK, Continental Europe and the USA during the same period.

The recordings are presented in losslessly compressed files (FLAC) and as streamable MP3s. They will be available for free download or streaming via an attractive web-based front-end that is easy to navigate and has a powerful search facility.

Beneath the front-end and search facilities is the robust XML repository developed for CHARM integrated with this new project's metadata, enabling quick access to both general and specialised data on the recordings, performances, and transfer methodology.

A set of web pages describing the project, its procedures and its staff provides the context (http://www.charm.kcl.ac.uk/sound/sound_mbi.html).

Outcomes

The quality of many of the performances we have made available proved to be remarkably high, easily the equal of the re-recordings of the same repertoire made by the newly-formed EMI using artists who are now much better known. The first recordings of many works, not just new works from

the early 20th century but also the first recordings of major compositions from the classical canon, are included. Artists of the highest calibre, who were gradually forgotten once they had been dropped from the record catalogues, can now be heard again and assessed in relation to their better-known contemporaries and successors.

We intended that MBI should enable a new estimation of the quality of professional music-making in Britain between the wars. We suggested in the original proposal that the renewed availability of these recordings should in the long run enable an evaluation of the ways in which record company A&R policies before 1950 affected musicians' careers and public taste, including beliefs about the strength and worth of national performance traditions. It should also enable performers (especially students) to draw and a much wider range of models for musical interpretation, with potential effects on emerging modern performance style. Teachers and lecturers will find it easier to show both the extent to which music's meaning depends on its performance and the radically different ways in which well-known scores used to be played and sung. The selection policies of the major CD reissue companies may also broaden once the public is able to hear this wider selection of early 20th-century artists.

These intentions still seem, at the end of the project, to be realistic and likely to be realised once these performances are easily available via the CHARM/MBI search interface. The interface itself should represent an important step forward in web-based accessibility and should also provide a robust framework into which we can fit future digitisations from the King's Sound Archive and elsewhere. The use of Excel together with Exceltagger as a platform for recording metadata and creating sound file tags is recommended to other projects since it permits sound files to be easily imported into personal media players with the metadata intact.

The procedures developed for transfer and the recording of metadata are simple yet comprehensive and could be adopted by any future sound recordings digitisation project offering up to 1,048,575 tracks.

Conclusions

There is still a huge amount of recorded music that remains inaccessible in old formats. While the earliest formats are remarkably secure on account of their storage medium (shellac is lasting much better than plastic), very few people can now find (and still fewer can play) 78rpm discs. There is therefore much to be gained for the musical public, as well as for students and researchers, from projects that transfer and reissue early recordings. Now that MBI is providing us with a well-designed search interface, the prospects for future projects, able to work quickly with large numbers of discs, look excellent. Equally, the same interface could give access to urgent transfers from later formats which are deteriorating much faster. The procedures and software we have devised could, we believe, provide an efficient basis for many future projects.

Implications

Although we certainly hope that much pleasure will be taken from MBI transfers by listeners and researchers everywhere, recordings are not just sources for pleasing aesthetic experiences. One of the great strengths of MBI was its basis in significant events of social and business history, underpinning its musical themes. The ways in which these performances created and then were removed from the market for recorded music has much to teach us about 20th-century taste and commercial thinking. We believe this is an approach that can be developed in valuable ways by other projects, so that results are significant for a wide range of academic and non-academic communities.

References

CHARM (The AHRC Research Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music)
www.charm.kcl.ac.uk