

Lectio praecursoria  
**Commercial recordings and  
music research**

**Lectio praecursoria read by Risto Pekka  
Pennanen on the 28th August 1999 at the  
University of Tampere, Finland**

In ethnomusicological literature it is often stressed that the researcher should collect his or her own field material on which to base the study. This synchronic, anthropological ideal tends to set awkward limits to the diachronic aspect of research. However, a historical perspective is important to the outside observer, because all performed music is a snapshot from ongoing historical processes.

Historical music research may address the origins, development and change of musical phenomena, the advents of innovations and the spread of influences. Its sources may, for example, include all or any of the following kinds of evidence: memory-based history, written documents, sound recordings and organological, iconographical and archaeological data.

Let us now turn to historical sound recordings as sources for music research. In the main, recordings may be either originally made for research purposes, or they may be recorded by radio stations or record companies. Archive recordings by previous researchers are often considered the most suitable for analysis, but they do not cover all cultures and eras. Given that all kinds of music were recorded commercially already in the early 20th century, early commercial recordings are often invaluable documents of the past.

There are several reasons why commercial recordings may be the most important source for historical musicology. Firstly, recordings contain documentation of already extinct music cultures, styles, genera and performance practices. The source value of commercial recordings is high when the object of study is, for example, performance practice and its change, or improvisation techniques. It may be that writ-

ten sources describe these aspects only superficially. Without the recordings of Alessandro Moreschi in 1902 and 1904 we would have no idea how the *castrato* singing style of the Papal chapel actually sounded.

Secondly, there is much memory-based music where the commercial recordings are more numerous and actually predate recordings made for the purposes of research. Such a case is Polish folk music. In the USA Polish immigrants recorded their folk music as early as in the 1920s.

Thirdly, commercial recordings are excellent sources for the study of popular music—a genre which is usually closely linked with mass media. The first known amateur field recording of bouzouki-based music in Greece was not made until 1955, whereas commercial bouzouki recordings were made in the USA as early as in the late 1920s.

Fourthly, there are works that exist only in recorded form, such as “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” by the Beatles.

Most textbooks of music research do not even mention commercial recordings as sources. In the case of Western classical music this echoes the antiquated view of classical music as a written tradition that should be studied from scores. During past decades, pioneering studies by practising musicians of the early music movement have set the new trend of performance practice studies in Western musicology. For example, the recordings by various violin virtuosos in the beginning of this century help us to reconstruct the various 19th-century schools of violin playing.

There are strongly rooted myths causing mental blocks that tend to inhibit the use of commercial recordings in some branches of musicology. The very term ‘commercial’ has horrified folk music researchers, who have concentrated on what they have considered ‘oral’, ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’. According to the proponents of ‘authenticity’, commercial aspects of record production distort the ‘authenticity’ in a piece of music, ‘commercial’ here probably meaning ‘having profit as a chief aim’. However, I doubt if music researchers should make such judgements; they are properly the domain of music criticism and philosophy. One can only wonder how the recordings of Cuban son bands made in a Cuban recording studio would be more ‘artificial’ and ‘unauthentic’ than those made with a portable multi-channel field studio.

There are musical traditions which have urbanised and become professionalised, thus leading to the distribution of music through commercial recordings, the radio, the television and perhaps even sheet music. The very core of popular music is mass production, dissemination in written or recorded form. I am reasonably convinced that Abba recordings contain very authentic Abba music. They are far removed from ‘artificial’. An Abba recording is an Abba recording is an Abba recording. In modern music research there is very little room to herd the sacred cow of ‘authenticity’.

One could argue that the presence of the researcher and the microphone nearly

always alters the nature of a musical situation. The most obvious cases of 'unauthentic' field recordings are those made using a multi-channel recorder to record the members of a group individually to facilitate transcription. This can be seen in the case of recordings of Central African 18-member horn bands. The technique gives a clear recording, but the variations brought about by the team work and inspiration of the performers in a real performance situation are inevitably lost.

There are many musical traditions heavily based on improvisation. They are much influenced by the interaction between the musicians and the audience. Thus, standard studio techniques tend to dampen the inspiration of improvising musicians. Recorded music should be taken for what it is. Studio recordings and live performances of the same piece can be totally different. The early acoustic recording technique imposed limits on the instrumentation and size of recording ensembles. When microphone technique was introduced in 1925, many previous limitations were overcome. One of the main limitations of the pre-LP era was the short duration possible for a recorded piece. However, one should remember that—for example—a piece of dance music in live performance and one from a recording might have different functions. In live performance one dance could last for twenty minutes or for as long as the dancers wish, but on record there is no need to record a long version for listening.

The introduction of the tape recorder in the 1940s marked the end of the relative realism of the previous era. Now recordings could be edited and manipulated. The classic symphony recordings by Arturo Toscanini were constructed not from one but from several takes. Later multi-channel techniques and various special effects further emphasised the character of the studio recording as a product of technology.

I would like to underline that the use of commercial recordings in music research requires strict source criticism which examines whether the authors, musicians, instruments, place and the date of origin are what they purport to be. Source criticism can also answer a crucial question: What can commercial recordings as sources reveal to us? Take, for instance, the early 1930s professional revue theatre recordings of 'scenes from Greek subculture' under the title 'rebetika'. Source criticism reveals that these recordings are not the rebetika proper of the subculture, and thus they can't be used for the study of that subculture. Instead, they are numbers from the revue theatre brought into the recording studio, romanticised, parodied, stylised images; clichés of the subculture written and performed by professionals of the Greek theatre. So, what can these recordings tell us? They give evidence of the interest the subculture held for the Greek urban mainstream audiences in the early 1930s.

In conclusion I would say that commercial recordings form a huge, largely unexplored world of documentation. In the future the study of this material will pose new theoretical and methodological challenges for music research.