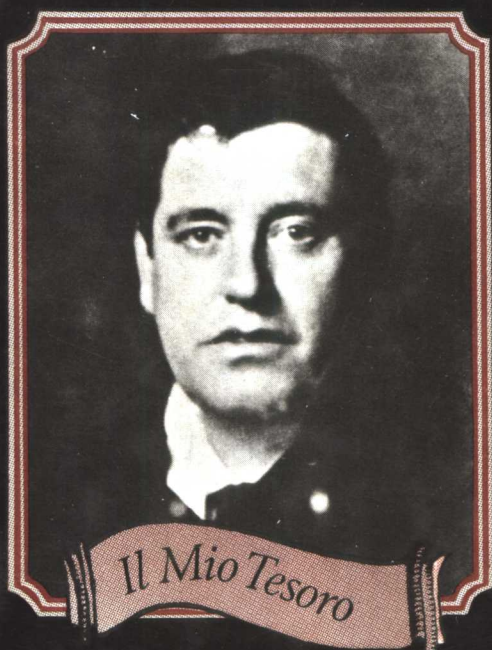


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The Great Irish Tenor



John McCormack

Gordon T. Ledbetter

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THE GREAT IRISH TENOR

Gordon T. Ledbetter



DUCKWORTH

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THE
GREAT IRISH
TENOR



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FOREWORD

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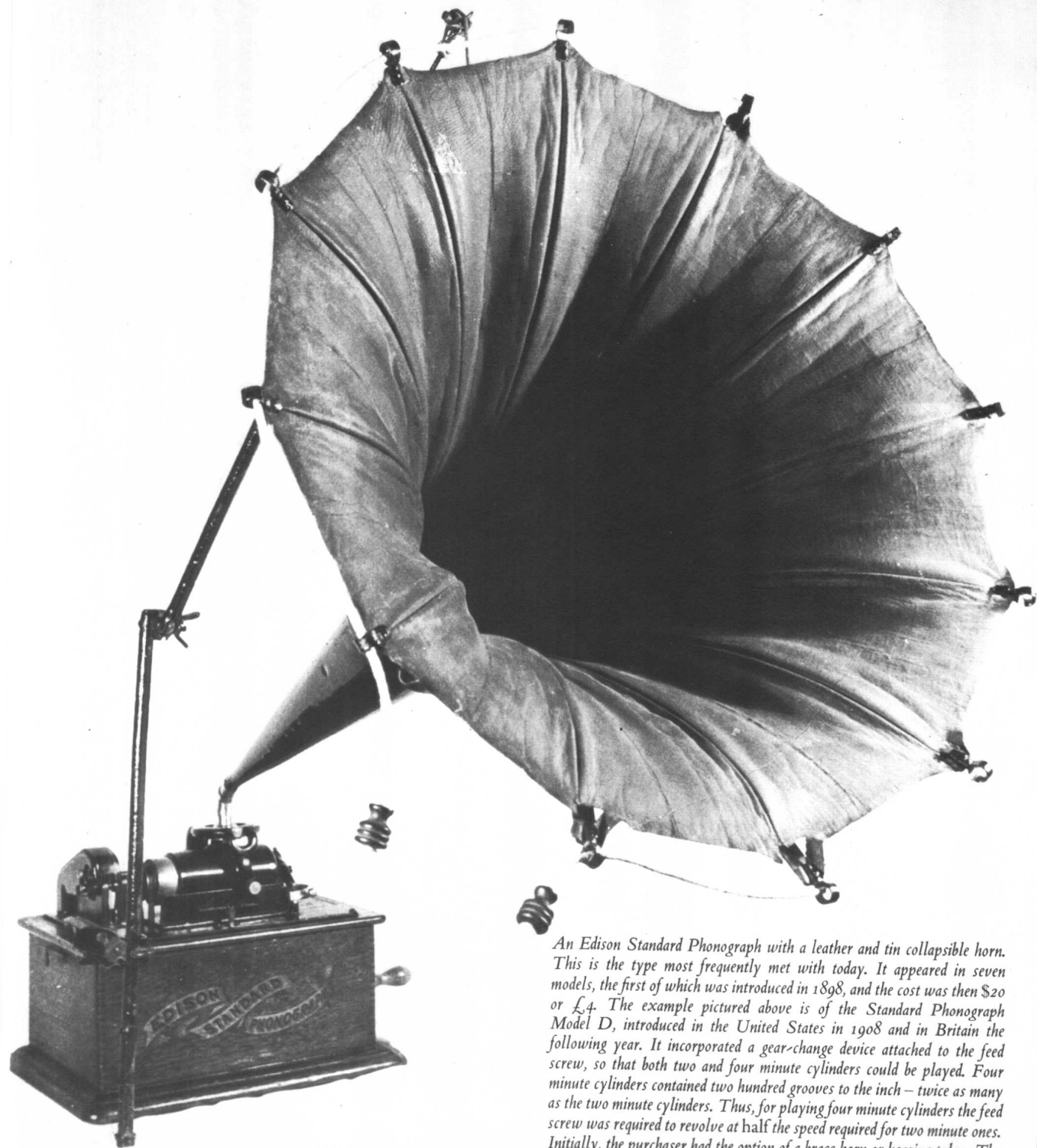
allowed me to quote from the unpublished memoirs of Alexander Williams RHA.

I acknowledge my thanks to the following publications for permission to use quoted extracts and visual material: *The Boston Sunday Post*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Gramophone*, *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, *Hi-Fidelity Magazine*, *Illustrated London News*, *The Irish Times*, *The Irish Independent*, *King Features*, *Il Mattino*, *Melbourne Herald*, *Musical America*, *New York Herald*, *New York Times*, *Punch*, *Sunday Times*, *The Record Collector* and *The Times*. I am most grateful to the following organizations and institutions for their help: The British Museum, The Library of Congress, The Italian Cultural Institute in Dublin, The National Library of Ireland, The New York Public Library, The McCormack Societies of America, Greater Kansas City Inc. and of Ireland, the Archives of the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, The Trinity College Library (especially to Liz Gleeson, Sheila NíThiarnaigh, Harry Bouvenizer and Jim O'Keefe for their unfailing help), to the Radio Times Hulton Picture Library and to the United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Edison National Historic Site.

Finally, I should like to express my gratitude to Dr Tom Walsh of Wexford, for reading the manuscript during its preparation and for making many useful suggestions.

Wicklow
January 1977

Gordon T. Ledbetter



An Edison Standard Phonograph with a leather and tin collapsible horn. This is the type most frequently met with today. It appeared in seven models, the first of which was introduced in 1898, and the cost was then \$20 or £4. The example pictured above is of the Standard Phonograph Model D, introduced in the United States in 1908 and in Britain the following year. It incorporated a gear-change device attached to the feed screw, so that both two and four minute cylinders could be played. Four minute cylinders contained two hundred grooves to the inch – twice as many as the two minute cylinders. Thus, for playing four minute cylinders the feed screw was required to revolve at half the speed required for two minute ones. Initially, the purchaser had the option of a brass horn or hearing tubes. The leather horn shown folded, right, would have been bought subsequently.

Prelude

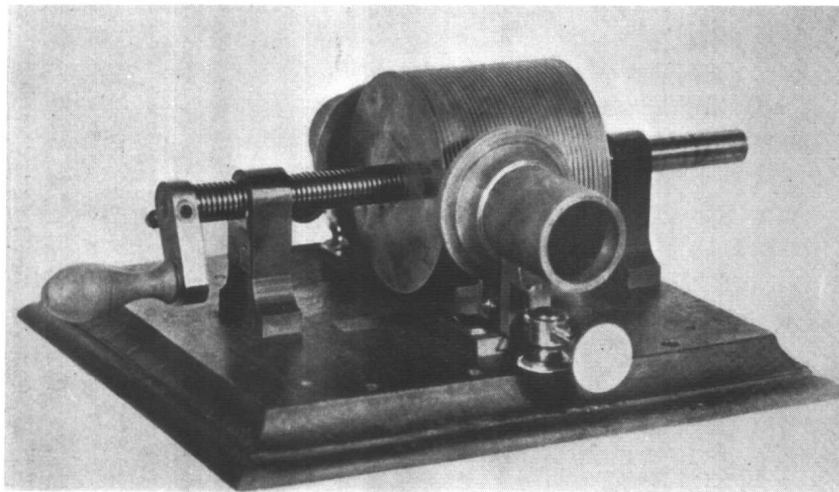
THE TALKING MACHINE

Suddenly, and with less than forty years between them, the photographic camera and the cylinder phonograph made their appearance. The interval was certainly short. Before the arrival of these two inventions, the latest means of documenting the present came with the systematic writing of language. And that development took place an estimated five thousand years earlier.

When Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre (1787–1851) announced his process of photography in Paris in 1839, France, Europe and indeed the whole world responded immediately. Professional photographers sprang up in virtually every capital city, and everyone who could afford it flocked to have their likeness taken. Photography was an instant success. When in 1877, in New Jersey, USA, Thomas Alva Edison (1847–1931) devised a machine that could record and reproduce sound, the world reacted with amazement – and then quickly forgot about it.

It is curious how differently the two inventions were received. The reason probably had much to do with the fact that the first photographs were extremely life-like whereas the first cylinder recordings were not. The immediate impact of photography perhaps also stemmed from its appeal to vanity, although it has to be admitted that this was not always the spirit in which it was received. When Queen Victoria asked her court painter, the Frenchman Alfred Chalfont, if he did not think photography would make painting redundant, he is said to have replied, 'Ah non, Madame! Photographie can't flattere.' Perhaps sound recording was found to be even less flattering. Certainly few who hear their voices played back for the first time relish the experience; and a speech recording is arguably more revealing than a photograph. When Columbia, disingenuously, advertised that one of the advantages of the phonograph was that 'Poor writers and spellers are enabled to





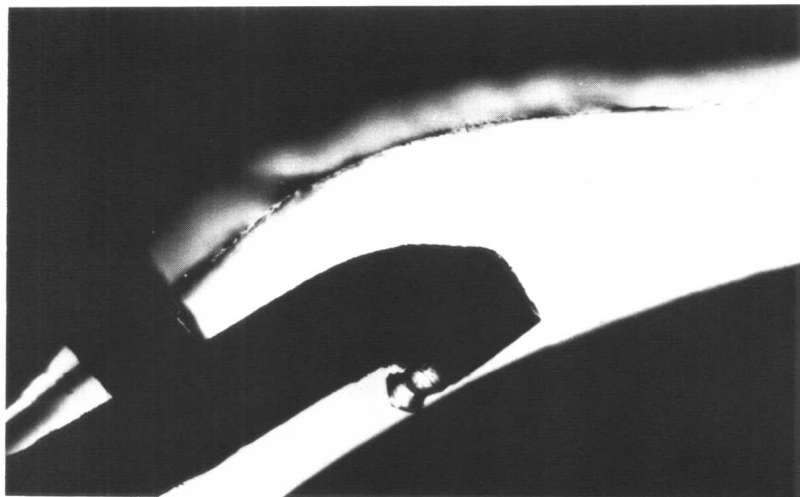
The original tin-foil phonograph of 1877. This model was sent to England when Edison applied for a British patent. In 1904 it was transferred from the Patent Museum to the Science Museum in South Kensington, London. On the fiftieth anniversary of its invention, it was returned to Edison at his request. It is now in the Edison Museum, West Orange, New Jersey.

communicate by mail without disclosure of their educational defects', the company could hardly have been further from the truth. In our physical appearance, the way we dress and part our hair, as in the way we write, we constantly cross barriers of class, but rarely is our speech so obliging.

Fired by the photographic perception of Juliet Margaret Cameron, the art critic Roger Fry (1866–1934) expressed the hope that:

One day . . . the National Portrait Gallery will be deprived of so large a part of its grant that it will turn to fostering the art of photography and will rely on its results for its records instead of buying acres of canvas covered at great expense by fashionable practitioners in paint.

Whatever the respective merits of painting and photography (and their functions) these media are to a degree interchangeable. There has never been an alternative to sound recording. Visual representation of history goes back as far as cave and wall paintings and primitive sculptures. Aural history of the same is no older than the phonograph. Had the period following its inception in 1877 been used for the development of sound recording, we might now be able to listen to, among so many others, the voice of Jenny Lind (1820–87) and the piano of Franz Liszt (1811–86). Indeed we might have had aural history stretching much further back. For so simple the construction, so readily available the materials required for a phonograph, that the event of sound recording and reproduction, unlike photography, could have taken place two thousand years ago.



Close-up of an Edison Model C stylus.

Edison's phonograph consisted essentially of a revolving cylinder of tin foil, later of wax, which also moved laterally on account of a thread screw along its axle. Sound vibrations received by a diaphragm were transferred to a recording stylus. The stylus then embedded a helical series of indentations on the tin foil. On running a second, smoother, stylus over the indentations the original vibrations were again set up on the diaphragm and thence transmitted into the surrounding air. The most advanced element in the design of the phonograph was the thread or feed screw. Used in conjunction with a worm, the most common arrangement was for the screw to drive the stylus along the length of the cylinder during the process of cutting the groove and during playback. Less frequently, it was the cylinder that travelled lengthwise while rotating and the stylus remained in a fixed position. Occasionally some phonographs, notably the German Puck machines, were marketed which dispensed with a feed screw altogether. As with the disc gramophone, the styli of these machines depended upon the walls of the groove for guidance. This, of course, was feasible only where playback was concerned and the groove had already been cut during recording.

The worm screw is an advance on Archimedes' screw, which was said to have been used in the third century BC for removing water from a ship's hold. So the phonograph as Edison conceived it could not have pre-dated Archimedes, who lived c. 287–212 BC. But a spiral groove is not an absolute necessity. A recording, albeit of very limited duration, could be made not only on the length of a cylinder but also on the edge of a wheel and consisting of but a single revolution. The potter's wheel could have served that purpose. If such means are allowed, then the

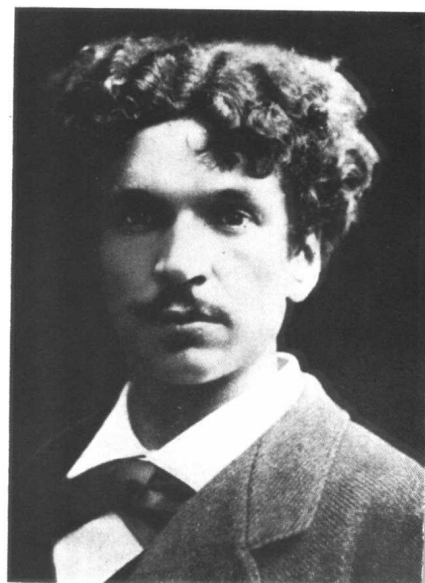
Prelude

period in which man might first have constructed a primitive phonograph or gramophone goes so far back as to be indeterminate. (I shall follow European usage in speaking of phonograph and gramophone when referring, respectively, to cylinder and disc machines.)

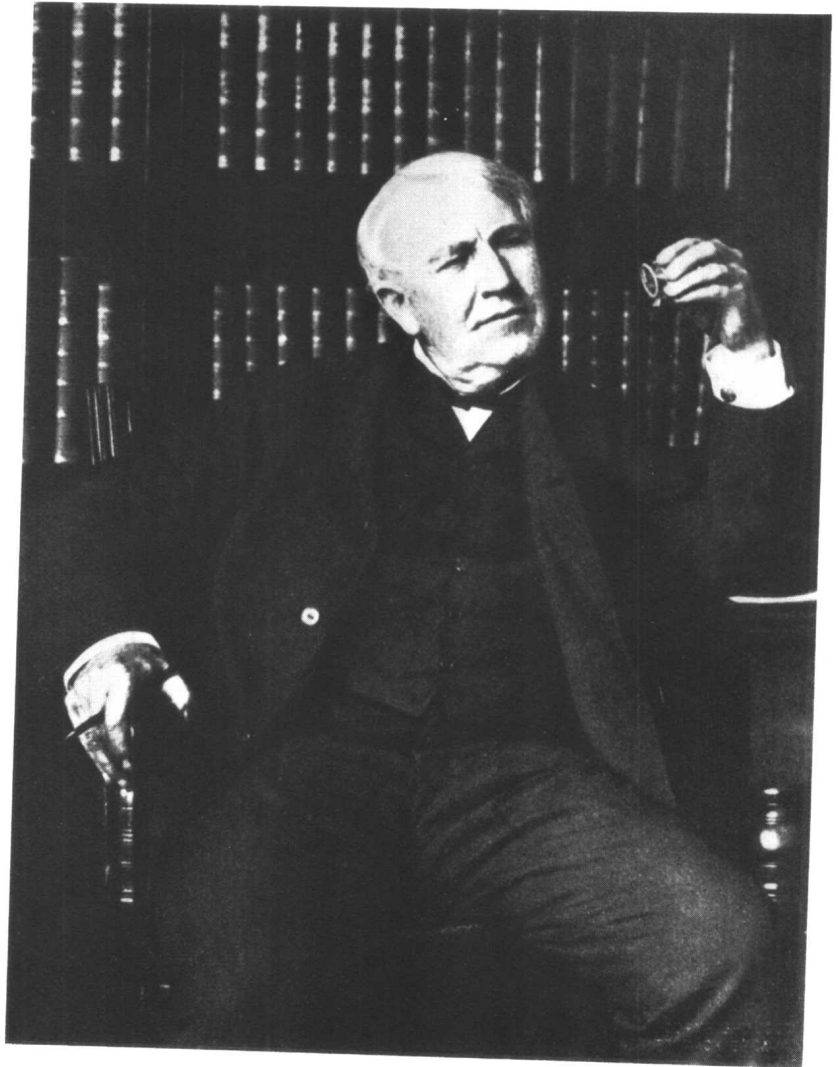
Certain it is that the actual construction of a talking machine would have offered the Ancients little trouble. What they could not do, for all their ingenuity, was to make the imaginative leap to envisage sound vibrations as a source of physical indentations and physical indentations as a source of sound. That realization came slowly, and when it came there was more than one man working along similar lines. Edison was the first to reproduce sound waves but he was not the first to conceive a means of doing so, and he was not the first to *record* sound waves. This event had taken place twenty years earlier, in 1857, on a machine called a phonautograph, the brainchild of Edouard Leon Scott de Martinville (1817-79). His machine consisted of a cylinder coated with lampblack, a diaphragm and a hog's bristle for a stylus. When the diaphragm was subjected to sound vibrations the bristle traced a wavy line through the lampblack. By such means, Scott was able to demonstrate that a correlation existed between the character of the wavy line and the kind of sounds received by the diaphragm. In a word, the wavy line was a sound-track.

Then on 10 April 1877, Charles Cros (1842-88), a poet and scientist, registered with the Académie des Sciences in Paris a method of photo-engraving the sound-track produced on a lampblack surface so as to obtain a three-dimensional, permanent, groove. This groove, he argued, could then become the means of reproducing the sounds that had originally created the wavy line. His theory was, essentially, valid. So Cros may be said to have been the first man to conceive a viable method of sound recording and reproduction. But he failed in his attempts to put the theory into practice.

Eight months later Edison succeeded, apparently without any knowledge of his predecessors. The source of his inspiration had come mainly from his familiarity with telegraphy, invented by Morse in 1844, and the telephone, invented by Gray and Bell in 1876. The deafness from which he suffered made Edison attach a sharp point to a telephone diaphragm in order to increase its volume, and the vibrations of the diaphragm actually caused the point to prick his finger. The phenomenon became the basis for his telephonic repeater, which consisted of a diaphragm and embossing point which recorded morse code on a rotating disc of paraffin paper, or a laterally moving strip of the same material. In the course of experimenting with this device, Edison

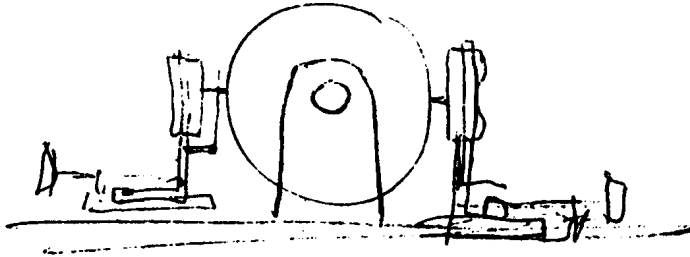
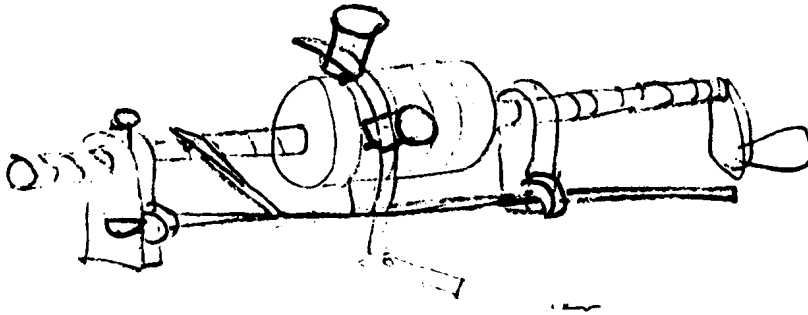


Charles Cros



Edison examining a reproducer – the stylus and diaphragm assembly. Originally, the reproducer was known under the less sophisticated title of ‘speaker’.

thought he could hear the indistinct reproduction of his own shouted ‘hullo’, and even of music. On a laboratory work sheet dated 18 July 1877, which noted these experiments, Edison asserted that, ‘there is no doubt that I shall be able to store up and reproduce automatically at any future time the human voice perfectly.’ Such was his confidence in this idea that Edison allowed his assistant Edward H. Johnson to make it public through a letter published in the *Scientific American* on 17 November. Johnson’s letter ended: ‘In view of the practical inventions already contributed by Mr Edison, is there anyone who is prepared to gainsay this prediction? I for one am satisfied it will be fulfilled, and that, too, at an early date.’



The two sketches Edison prepared for his workman, John Kreusi, and from which was constructed the first tin-foil phonograph. The sketches are dated 29 November 1877.

The date was 6 December 1877. In front of a sceptical workman, John Kreusi, who had just completed the machine, Edison shouted into the mouthpiece the words 'Mary had a little lamb . . .', and moments later, through the tortuous sound of tin foil under stress, heard his voice played back. On 22 December the *Scientific American* reported that:

Mr Thomas Edison recently came into this office, placed a little machine on our desk, turned a crank and the machine enquired as to our health, asked how we like the phonograph, informed us that it was very well, and bid us a cordial good-night. These remarks were not only perfectly audible to ourselves, but to a dozen or more persons gathered around . . .

The same article proceeded to express wonder and surprise at the powers of modern machinery, particularly at this very small piece, not much bigger than the contemporary camera, which was able to produce words of human speech; unclear and barely audible they might be, but yet undoubtedly human and therefore all the more weird. The article finished by foretelling:

When it becomes possible, as it doubtless will, to magnify the sound, the voices of such singers as Parepa and Tietiens will not die with them, but will remain as long as the metal in which they may be embodied will last.

Edison became a celebrity. In April 1878 he travelled to the White House to demonstrate his invention, and Rutherford B. Hayes became

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The French soprano Emma Calvé as Carmen. No doubt Edison's idea that the last words of the dying should be recorded has been fulfilled at some time or another. Calvé came close enough to it when on 4 January 1942 she recorded an extraordinary speech which ended: 'Je vais m'endormir sur la grande mer berceuse, le cœur content d'avoir fait mon devoir de bonne petite française. Mon grandpère, l'officier de Napoleon I décoré sur le champ de bataille, l'avait fait autrement et plus dangereusement que moi, mais — je ne suis qu'une femme. Il était temps de partir; je suis à bout de force.' Calvé died two days later, on 6 January 1942.



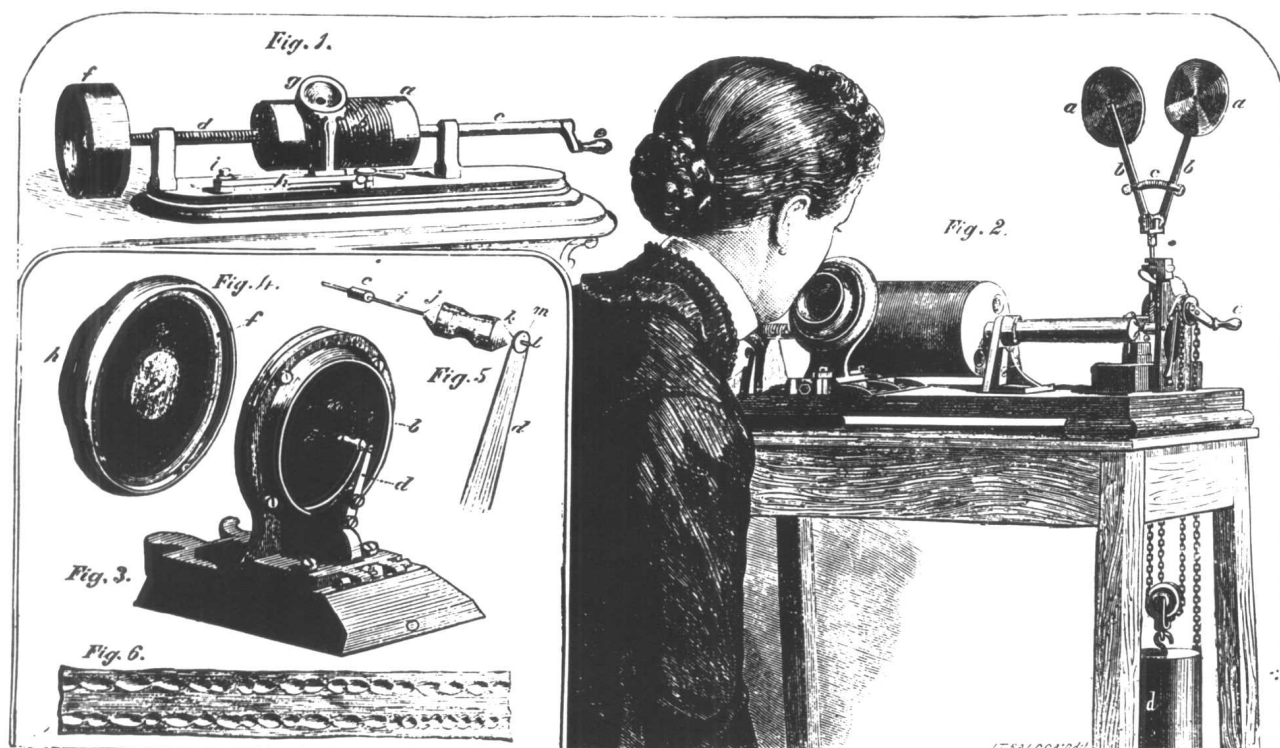
The Talking Machine

the first president to record. Unfortunately, the cylinders have been lost.

It is sometimes thought that Edison was not aware of the potential of his invention, but this was far from being the case. When he patented his talking machine he envisaged it being used for:

Letter writing and all kinds of dictations; phonographic books; the teaching of elocution; talking clocks that should announce in articulate speech the time for going home, going to meals etc., a Registry of Sayings, Reminiscences etc. by members of a family in their own voices, and the last words of dying persons.

The value of recording to industry is now taken for granted though not, perhaps, for its ability to 'announce in articulate speech the time for going home'. Nevertheless, talking clocks did have a vogue as a substitute for chiming bells and cuckoo calls. One German company, B. Hiller, manufactured no less than three hundred talking clocks built to their 1911 model specifications. And it was rarely short of words, announcing the time, as it did, every quarter of an hour for twelve hours a day. Although families recorded conversations for their own amusement, a register of sayings by members of a family never enjoyed the same vogue as the hallowed family photographic album did before the First World War. But only one of Edison's ideas failed to have any vogue at all. That was the idea of recording 'the last words of the dying'. Maybe the phonograph arrived too late. But whatever our dismay at the Victorian preoccupation with the death-bed, it could not be greater than would be theirs at our preoccupation with the mating one.



On 3 August 1878 the *Illustrated London News* devoted three columns of writing and a page of drawings to the wonderful talking machine. The article began, 'This is an age of scientific marvels, if not of miracles . . .' and went on rather unscientifically:

Witnessing its performances, one is apt to take the stories of genii bottled up for long years to be freed at last, of frozen tunes, released by warmth, flooding the air with melody, and other romances of a like kind, as veritable prophecies of the good time coming, couched in this sort of rollicking nonsense to hide their true meaning from the uninitiated, and possibly to save the narrators' heads.

But the good time was not yet at hand. Edison left his invention untouched for almost ten years. In the interval, he produced the first incandescent lamp – made of carbonized cotton – which blazed, uninterrupted, for forty hours.

Meanwhile, Alexander Bell (1847–1922), with the prize money of \$10,000 which he had won for the invention of the telephone, had set up his Volta Laboratory in Washington D.C. He was joined by his cousin Chichester Bell (1848–1924) and Charles S. Tainter (1854–1940). They experimented along the lines of Edison's tin-foil phonograph and

Drawings of the phonograph from the *Illustrated London News*, 3 August 1878. Fig. 1 shows a phonograph modified from the original tin-foil model by the addition of a heavy fly-wheel 'to secure as far as possible uniformity of motion'. This was the design Edison demonstrated at the White House in April 1878. The two brass discs in Fig. 2 also acted as a governor. Note the weight suspended by a chain underneath the table and connected to a pulley at the axle of the cylinder. As the weight descended – so rotating the cylinder – it was possible to wind up the chain, and maintain the motion of the cylinder without interruption. Figs. 3 and 5 show a reproducer, and Fig. 6 the indentations of a sound track.