

Historic Recordings Presented to NZBS

SHORTLY before Professor Shelley retired from the Directorship of the NZBS, he suggested to Sir James Hight that Sir James's large collection of Edison cylinder recordings could form the nucleus of an NZBS museum. As a result of this suggestion, the Service is now in possession of a last model Edison phonograph, and a large number of cylinder recordings which date back to the turn of the century. In view of the growing popularity of antique and other record collecting, it is likely that the collection will be of more than academic interest both at present and in the future. Any museum of recorded sound would be a poor thing without a full account of Edison's genius.

SIR JAMES HIGHT believes that such a museum of recorded sound should "contain anything connected directly or indirectly with the functions, means, technique, range and effects, of the art of communicating sound over the air." His own collection began about sixty years ago, when he first heard an Edison phonograph. This may possibly have been the one brought out by Professor Archibald in 1891, with which demonstrations were given in the old Oddfellows' Hall in Lichfield Street, Christchurch. Sir James was so impressed by the machine's possibilities that he bought one and began buying records and later-type machines. He continued to do so up to the date when the cylinder records went out of production.

In association with the musical staff of the University, the collection was used as a basis to launch the lunch hour and other recorded music recitals, which have been a regular feature of Canterbury University College life since 1928.

The collection, which has now been carefully catalogued by 3YA staff, contains recordings under every heading, light to serious. The vocal sections are large because in the early days of recording, voices came through better than instruments. Choirs, however, recorded poorest of all. Such records were not made successfully until the electric era. The voices of Sarah Bernhardt, Shackleton, Theodore Roosevelt, Anna Case, Marie Rappold, Rose Heilbronner, Selma Kurz, the playing of Albert Spalding, Kathleen Parlow, Sousa's Band, echo scratchily from the past. But enough of their greatness comes through to spark forever the controversies which musicians love.

How They Began

The singer stands on a high stool. Her head is almost inside a huge horn, nearly as big as herself. All around her, above, on platforms, at the sides, below her, are musicians. A complete orchestra is packed into a few square feet. Fiddlers and trombonists, 'cellists and tympanists, each one painstakingly aims the sounds from his instrument towards the opening of the huge horn.

Knees bend! Suddenly the artist bobs down under the horn. The orchestra opens with its introduction. *Knees straight!* Up bobs the singer, to the exact spot she left a moment ago. She begins her song. Not for a second does she waver from the position she has been drilled to hold. Here comes the high note. She leans back from the massive horn. Back, back, as she reaches higher. Then forward, forward as she glissades down to her lowest register. As she utters the lowest note her head almost disappears inside the horn. *Knees bend!* The orchestra swells into its interlude. Up bobs the singer once more, and the song continues.

So grotesque seemed the pantomime of recording in the early days that many



JANET PULLON and Fred Hyde, of 3YA's programme department, examine Sir James Hight's Edison phonograph

famous artists could not be persuaded to take the whole business seriously. As a result, many did not agree to make recordings until their prime was past.

But not so with others who were astute enough to realise the possibilities of the gramophone. Melba, Caruso, Tamagno, Paderewski, Kubelik, practised antics demanded by the huge horn. Adelina Patti held out the longest of all the singers of her time. Finally the whole recording company arrived at her home in Wales and afterwards she heard her own voice for the first time. Did she giggle inanely as we do nowadays who are first introduced to our own voice on a tape recorder? Decidedly not. "Ah! mon Dieu!" cried Adelina. "Now I understand why I am Patti. Ah, yes! What a voice! What an artist! I fully understand it all!"

The Horn of Plenty

With Adelina Patti's surrender to the new medium, every artist, whether of low or high standing, rushed to the recording companies and the boom began. Every home had its gramophone, just as every home has its radio now. Money poured into the laps of the gramophone companies. Records could be bought everywhere, and patent rights battles were fought on all sides.

The gramophone was really fairly launched by 1890, in the form of Edison's phonograph. The first of these to reach New Zealand was brought out by Professor Archibald in 1891. It was exhibited in Wellington on March 13 in that year. It had a metal horn which was an improvement on the ear tubes of the earliest models.

The story of the gramophone and the phonograph is a curious one. Edison invented the first means of reproducing sound. Of that there is no doubt. He adapted a gadget, called the phonauto-

graph, which had been invented in France. This device merely made a mark on a sooted drum in response to sounds. Edison substituted tinfoil for the sooted paper, and played the cylinder back.

"Mary had a little lamb" were the first words ever recorded. We who meet a tape recorder for the first time today are similarly bereft of speech and have to fall back on nursery rhymes. Edison did not first realise how much people love the sound of their own voices, and he went on working with his electric lamp. But soon he was forced by popular demand to develop his phonograph. The black cylinders were soon found all over the world, even though for some reason the Edison Company tried at first to keep them within the bounds of the United States.

But there was a basic weakness in Edison's system. His needle recorded by "bouncing" up and down in the groove. It could not reproduce a wide sound range without distortion. So it was left to Berliner to make the needle cut a wiggly line sideways instead of up and down. Moreover, Berliner used a disc instead of a cylinder—discs were easier to mass produce—and the new device was named the gramophone. So began the day of the gramophone factory and the flourishing recording companies.

But Edison would not change his method. He refined it to the point of producing discs himself, but still used the "bounce" method to cut the groove. They played longer than "wavy" groove records, but were inevitably supplanted.

Thousands who had phonographs continued to buy his records, even of the cylinder type. There was always a comforting solidity about everything the Edison company made. There was never any shoddiness or gim-crackery. But production finally ceased in the

twenties. The competition from the gramophone became too fierce to meet, and the Edison Company turned to its other numerous fields. However, until the late twenties thousands remained loyal to the phonograph.

The Day of the Platterbug

But whether they supported gramophone or phonograph, those who were among the earliest to own machines and buy numbers of records, have in many instances had their loyalty repaid.

Antique disc and cylinder record-collecting has become a hobby that is sweeping the world. The first fringes of the wave are licking at New Zealand now. A Jacob S. Schneider (in U.S.A., of course!) values his collection at 300,000 dollars, and nobody doubts his word. Schneider started early by buying in bulk, and is said to have made 250,000 dollars profit.

Prices range from 2 or 3 dollars to 5000 dollars. British values, of course, are much more conservative, but enthusiasts in New Zealand have already been known to pay over £5 for a single record.

Here are some of the valuable titles that New Zealanders may have up in the attic. Valentino singing "El Relicario," in Spanish; Paul Whiteman's nine-piece band playing "Do You Ever Think of Me?" "Zulu's Ball" and "Workingman's Blues," by King Oliver (top offer for this to date is 5000 dollars!); Mary Garden singing the Card Scene from *Carmen*; Elena Gerhardt recording under the Hugo Wolff Society label, or a *Don Giovanni* aria by Sir Joseph Stanley; any early Caruso records made before he went to America; or those of the tenor Battistini, who made records in Poland. The greatest prize of all would be a record of the voice of Jenny Lind. Some say she never made a record. Others insist she did.

All these records (according to figures from American magazines) are worth from 50 to over 1000 dollars.

As do all collector values, of course, prices for records vary widely from time to time. But this doesn't deter such people as Anthony Eden, who is a keen collector, from the hobby.

Most who are in the field buy up large heaps of records from second-hand markets where they can still be bought cheaply in bulk. They then set to work cataloguing, and swapping or selling to other enthusiasts who advertise in such magazines as *The Gramophone*.

Just as with stamp collectors, some specialise in various types of record, from early sopranos to late conductors. There is scope for most interests.

In New Zealand each centre already has at least one shop specialising in antique records. (Don't say second-hand records!—you'll be met with a frown.)

Records in good condition fetch higher prices and so do peculiarities of labelling, or recording, such as tenors who hiccup in the middle of an aria, or famous pianists who fumble the odd arpeggio.

Collectors are not necessarily listeners. In fact, so accustomed have we become to high fidelity modern recordings, that it is hard to sit right through an early disc or cylinder playing.

The antique collector, in fact, may be quite unmusical. He is different from the collector of modern recordings who is a musician first and a collector last. But meet one and you are likely to be bitten by the platterbug, too.

—R.W.F.