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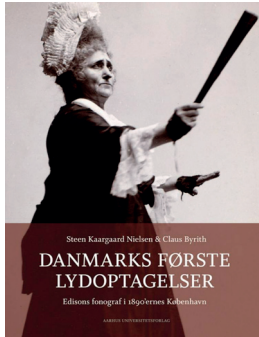
c/o Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, Section of Musicology,
University of Copenhagen, Karen Blixens Vej 1, DK-2300 København S

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Steen Kaargaard Nielsen and Claus Byrith
*Danmarks første lydoptagelser. Edisons fonograf i 1890'ernes
 København*

Aarhus: Det Kgl. Bibliotek og Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2017
 268 pp., illus., incl. 2 CDs
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The research on the technological and the ‘cultural origins of sound reproduction’ (the subtitle of Jonathan Sterne’s crucial book on *The Audible Past* from 2003) and sound recording has gone quite a way since its beginning. In history, and especially in the history of technology, selected studies focused for quite some time on the industry and the inventions of the political dimensions of these machines. However, only since the beginning of this century may one observe a more complex research approach to these inventions, their advertisement, and their undoubtedly remarkable, global and lasting success. Often, this global perspective leads to a myopia that tends to focus on the developments, the struggles, and histories in the USA, in Germany or the UK, sometimes France. The manifold histories and examples on how sound reproduction technology was being appropriated and *domesticized* in the different national research cultures and their economies (and especially their historical and local listening and sound cultures) often are ignored.

The present book, *Danmarks første lydoptagelser* by Steen Kaargaard Nielsen and Claus Byrith, intends to change this and to broaden the perspective. Both authors document, discuss and analyse how Edison’s phonograph entered the cultural sphere of musical performers, singers, actors or just listeners in Denmark of the 1890s. They therefore make use of the Royal Library’s collection of phonograph cylinders bearing the name of consul general Gottfried Ruben. As early as 1889, he invited twenty Danish journalists to his home so as to experience and to learn about Thomas Alva Edison’s new invention and product, the famous *phonograph*. Thus as often in the history of new listening and recording machines, it was a unique marketing event and a kind of launch show that stood at the beginning of the phonograph’s introduction to Denmark. It was an exceptional event which was integral for realizing the business interests of many people involved and present – but of course massively framed by the excitement, the curiosity and also the severe doubts which they had concerning the new technology. The chance to lay one’s hands on such a new technology was as crucial to these historical events as they are today with thousands of developers or producers gathering in conference halls

to witness the presentation of a new generation of smartphones or operating systems. In terms of both the phonograph and the smartphone, the main goal was and is to create the need and interest in a population of buyers and to sell on the spot as many units as possible of this new commodity.

The present book therefore starts out with a description and analysis of this event; then it continues to the historical and technical matters before unfolding the details of the famous Ruben-collection of recordings on cylinders housed in the Royal Library. The book explains the precise functioning of Edison's phonograph as well as some earlier versions of it. It delves especially into the details of the research and development carried out in order to present all the elements that need to work together in order to provide a recording as well as a playback mechanism: the production of the cylinders, the specific motor and its supply with electricity, the speed regulator. Finally, the role of the historical cylinders is discussed in respect to Danish cultural and music history. In addition, the latest efforts of restoration, documentation and digitization of the historical cylinders are documented and discussed. In the truest sense of the word, the book provides its readers with the full cultural, musical and technological history of the early cylinder recordings in Denmark.

However, the largest part of the book, *c.* 150 pages, presents and documents, all in all, 67 audio files from the Ruben-collection which are included on two CDs: recordings from the Royal Theatre and private as well as vaudeville theatres, from concert performances, literature recitations and private recordings. It is the detailed accounts of the recording situations (incl. artists, performers, ensembles or speakers involved, date or year of the recording, photographs, posters or drawings of performers and sometimes venue, use of technology or obstacles and reactions of performers in this specific recording situation) that represent probably the most valid treasure of this publication. When listening to these early recordings of performances, one obviously gets a twofold insight into the historical listening and sound culture: 1) one may experience the distinct styles of performing in the theatre or at a vaudeville theatre at the time; and 2) one may experience the limits of noise reduction and signal transduction that was technologically possible at the time. On the two CDs, the state of entertainment styles and recording habits of the 1890s is not only stored but also made accessible and researchable.

Some of the most intriguing recordings on the CDs are, however, two very special audio files. They were recorded at private gatherings including Czar Alexander III and his wife, Princess Dagmar of Denmark (either in Fredensborg or later in Petersburg), and the family of the then famous comedy actor of the Royal Theatre Olaf Poulsen who was visiting the Ruben family. Today such encounters qualify as common everyday recordings with a more fun if not annoying character; however, at this historical point such recordings were major representations of national achievements and reasons for pride of technological advances in the 20th century. The recordings are obviously a strange and alien encounter for the protagonists in both of these documents. In the early

1890s, when both recordings were made, they indeed represented an encounter with a ‘sufficiently advanced technology’ that factually was perceived as being ‘indistinguishable from magic’ as science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke noted seventy years later in his essay *Hazards of Prophecy*. This magic had, however, still an unfortunate noise to signal-ratio; but in the recordings one may sense the playful and joyful experience those singers and actors associated with this strange new apparatus. Through all the cyclical hiss and noise that materializes the largely continuous rotating of the cylinders sonically – through all this unintentional dirt and glitches of the machine and through all the tense vocal and instrumental performances right into the phonograph’s recording orifice – one can auscultate the culture of speaking and performing onstage for a recording machine 120 years ago. Yet, one recording still ends with an innocent pun from the side of comedian Olaf Poulsen directed towards his host, the consul general Ruben: ‘Endnu en gang hjertelig tak for i dag, hr. generalkonsul Ruben. Vi glemmer aldrig dette lille martinique eller, hvad jeg ville sige, “matinee”.’ (p. 257).

Holger Schulze

The author:

Holger Schulze, Prof., Dr., Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen, Karen Blixens Vej 1, DK-2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark · schulze@hum.ku.dk