

British Library Sound Archive

The British Library Sound Archive opened in 1955 as the British Institute of Recorded Sound, it became part of the British Library in 1983. The Sound Archive holds over a million discs, 185,000 tapes, and many other sound and video recordings. The collections come from all over the world and cover the entire range of recorded sound from music, drama and literature, to oral history and wildlife sounds. They range from cylinders made in the late 19th century to the latest CD, DVD and minidisc recordings. The Sound Archive keeps copies of commercial recordings issued in the United Kingdom, together with selected commercial recordings from overseas, radio broadcasts and many privately-made recordings.

The online catalogue includes entries for almost three-and-a-half million recordings held in the Sound Archive and is updated daily. 60% of these recordings are only available as analogue material. It is not accessible and frequently in a vulnerable state. About 4000 hours of audio is available on CD. 2% of the material is available online.

Archival Sound Recordings is an audio resource for UK Higher and Further Education. It offers 12,000 selected recordings of music, spoken word, and human and natural environment. Anyone can search or browse the resource. Only staff and students of universities and colleges in the UK can play the recordings, if their institution has signed a licensing agreement with the British Library that is. Downloading is also available in licensed institutions in the UK. Other users can come and listen to the recordings in the Sound Archive's reading rooms.

The selection of recordings was made on the basis of ranking by the user community who indicated which material they would like to have made available. The users also wanted the possibility of downloading the material so they could consult it in their own institution. All metadata used conform open standards, so the institutions can harvest them. Because the metadata are open, most people access the content via search engines rather than the audio resource's homepage.

The resource presently gets 80,000 hits, 1500 streams, and 2000 downloads per month. In the future more content will be added. There is a growing interest in contributions from users, and the project will therefore explore the possibility of annotation of the material by users. To facilitate contact with users the project now has an engagement officer, who goes to visit user groups, also presenting showcases of the material.

The rights issue of the oral history material is complex. When the research recordings were deposited, CDs or the WWW did not yet exist. It is difficult to trace the rights owners of the material, even impossible in some cases. The Sound Archive does use some of the material anyway when they can demonstrate that they have made every effort to find the rights owners.

See: <http://cadensa.bl.uk/>