

Phonogrammarchiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences

The Phonogrammarchiv is the oldest audiovisual research archive in the world. Founded in 1899, the archive keeps numerous early recordings which are now part of the world register of UNESCO's "Memory of the World" Programme. The historical material of the Phonogrammarchiv comprises approx. 4000 recordings from all over the world.

Most of these recordings were made with the so-called Archiv-Phonogramme and gramophone discs, a recording system which was developed in Vienna around 1900 to replace the commonly used wax cylinder recordings. Although the Edison phonograph was ideal for field work, the quality of the recordings on wax cylinders deteriorated every time they were reproduced. The Archiv-Phonogramme was used for field recordings until 1931. In many cases, these historical recordings are the earliest of their kind, documenting cultures and languages that no longer exist in the form preserved here. The collection is very varied: it includes languages, music (mainly non-European), recordings of exceptional voice timbre such as shouting or crying and acoustical phenomena (e.g. bangs).

Collections include among others, sound documents from Papua New Guinea 1904-1906 of Rudolf Pöch, founder of modern anthropology in Austria, various traditions and styles of Bible recitation in the Jewish diaspora (1911-1913), songs of Russian Prisoners of War from World War I, and voice portraits: recordings of renowned personages such as Emperor Franz Joseph I. The safeguarding of the recordings and making them accessible for the research community is the "core business" of the archive.

In 1979 the Phonogrammarchiv started with a series of historical recordings (1899-1950), first on LP, later on CD. Curator of the Historical Collections and editor of the CD-Edition is Dr. Gerda Lechleitner. She explains the reasons why the Phonogrammarchiv chooses for this rather conventional form of publication. First of all she says, "these are scientific recordings meant for the academic community. Our users need the best possible sound quality, and they like the possibility to hear the recordings and use the booklet with modern commentaries and transliterations/transcriptions that comes with the CD."

The modern commentaries explain the historical setting of the recordings from today's point of view. They contain concise information about the field work or the leader of the project, as well as information about the general conditions pertaining to the realisation of the recording project, which may not be evident from the documentation. They also include references to published research focusing on these sound documents as well as references to recordings of related content. The comments thus provide information about the characterisation of the acoustic source and its position in a broader cultural context, in order to facilitate the use of the recordings for scientific research. All these facts might be published online as well, either as a distinct online-publication or as a virtual exhibition.

There is however another important factor to be mentioned: "we feel morally obliged to give back history to the countries of origin, and therefore we wanted to offer a widely used publication format. We have found that they wish to get something 'real', like a CD box, rather than a virtual file, whatever advantages the internet may have".

But times are changing, Gerda Lechleitner adds. Our online catalogue gives information about where and when recordings were made, who and what was recorded, and other basic data. We can organize and combine these data into overviews that go far beyond what we could imagine before the digital era started. The possibility of "global search" opens new insights, bringing connections to the surface from

the wealth of data. Depending on the interest and the depth of expertise, various levels of access and delivery can be defined and translated into different presentations.

As we work with our own recordings, we have no copyright problems and could consider providing access to the materials through an online catalogue that contains all the information. But the sound quality that we consider necessary for serious study of historical recordings allows us only to display very short sound samples, just permitting a first impression. In addition, our publications on CD present “a whole story”, comprising much more than catalogue information and enabling a deeper insight, e.g. by comparing, connecting or reflecting on topics behind the “mere” sound, questions concerning the psychological, social, and cultural environment. Not everybody will be interested in all this information, but others will find it useful. So the “landscape” of delivery and presentation seems complex – both online and CD make sense and have their pros and cons. Gerda would prefer not to think in terms of choosing between two options, but to have both, each serving different purposes.