

Sonorous Remnants of the Past: The Phonograph and the Making of Mexican Aural  
Modernity, 1878-1913

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## ABSTRACT

### Sonorous Remnants of the Past: The Phonograph and the Making of Mexican Aural Modernity, 1878-1913

Lluvia Mara Rodriguez Ayala

Since its invention in 1877, the phonograph produced a torrent of speculation about its mechanism, capable of collecting and preserving the sounds that seemed lost forever. For the members of the Mexico's industrial and political elites, this novel technology reinforced principles of modernization, cosmopolitanism, and progress that they sought to achieve in the country's capital.

This thesis turns to the reception of the phonograph in Mexico City between 1878 and 1913 by examining how the new recording technology altered the aural texture of Mexico City, in the process transforming both auditory and cultural practices. How did the residents of Mexico City contest and reconfigure the user protocols and presumed meanings that companies from the Global North had developed for the phonograph in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries? What impact did the phonograph have on the reconfiguration of social and spatial listening practices in Mexico City? What, finally, can an emerging Mexican aural modernity tell us about the active adaptation of the talking machine to the social and economic practices of the urban poor between 1870 and 1913?

As this study posits, the development of sound technology in Mexico between 1878 and 1913 did not, by itself, usher in an era of modern aural. Rather, a Mexican aural modernity emerged from the aural practices and embodied knowledge with which members of the lettered elites, middle- and working-class inhabitants, petty entrepreneurs and musicians approached the phonograph. The meanings of this new technology were shaped by local ontologies of listening which refined the concept of usage of imported mechanical production of sound in a living act of syncretism with local aural expressions. Ostensibly modern, this emerging twentieth-century Mexican soundscape carried traditional acoustic dimensions; etched into it were the vocalities of indigenous, Afro-descended, and mestizo peoples. *Sonorous Remnants of the Past* thus contributes to the study of aural and sound recording in the Global South by critically examining the role of technological transmission and its interaction with social and cultural dynamics that then shaped its innovation, meaning, and use.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## PRELUDE

**September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015. 12.30 am.** Hordes of people were moving through the meager free space left in Zocalo square at the heart of Mexico City's Downtown to wearily look for the closest exit and finally return home. This scene was part of the Grito de Independencia, an annual patriotic celebration that marked the more than 200 years of Mexican political independence from Spain's colonial Empire. We were there to record the soundscapes of that cold night and the sonic dialogue between president Enrique Peña Nieto and the multitudes. That night the former president appeared on the balcony of the federal government building, wearing the official sash (a tricolor Mexican flag) and a chain to ring the famous bell of Dolores, which symbolizes the Independence of Mexico in Dolores Hidalgo. His short speech and brief appearance echoed the political tension of that year. Some would argue that a distinctive Mexican soundmark was the cry for justice, and this night was no different. Beneath the booming voice of the loudspeakers, ordering attendees to leave the square peacefully and in order, were people's voices clamouring to know the truth behind the disappearance of forty-one students in Ayotzinapa less than eleven months prior. Voices of people supporting Peña Nieto's government. Voices of people clamouring for the band to play music again.

★                      ★                      ★

My daily walking tours during that summer were the beginning of an extensive personal project to collect acoustic samples of Mexican life. When walking through the city, I was able to listen to the cries that street vendors used to call out to potential customers. This collective symphony of voices was playing alongside sound reproduction devices which intensified the sensorial elements of the summoning. Critical attention to Mexico City's



auditory landscape revealed a unique use of vocal communication and orality that has long been fundamental to the economic and cultural transactions among city dwellers and visiting travelers. During the course of these frequent field trips, I realized that a study of the past and present of the Mexican experience was incomplete without accounting for the sonorous world presented in the urban space.

## INTRODUCTION

### SITUATING HEARING

*Are we not touched by the same breath of air which was among that which came before? is there not an echo of those who have been silenced in the voices to which we lend our ears today?*<sup>1</sup>

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Mexico was immersed in a continuous process of “pacification” under the presidency of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911) that slowly mitigated the internal and external conflicts that had been present throughout the century. Díaz’s political reforms were linked to a process of industrialization and involved the creation of strong state institutions. He also established economic agreements with international investors. Díaz steered the country towards a liberal economic system and enjoyed the support of the ruling classes in his quest to modernize Mexico. Díaz’s priority was to introduce Mexico City to the world as an advanced metropolis. He liked to represent the capital city as a symbol of an industrial, modern, and stable country whose economic success allowed its inhabitants to enjoy the novel technologies of the nineteenth century.

Close economic bonds with the United States facilitated the arrival of the phonograph in Mexico City, a new sound recording device that had been created in 1877 by Thomas Alva Edison. This apparatus was exhibited for the first time to a Mexican audience on 13 October 1878 after permission had been obtained from the Public Amusement Section of Mexico City’s Constitutional City Council. According to the daily paper *La Patria*, John W. Wexel and Frank De Gress — Edison’s business agents in Mexico — displayed some of his recent inventions to a public that was left astonished by “the test of the phonograph at the Theater Netzahualcoyotl; by the device that writes and reproduce so

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, Hannah Arendt ed., *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 255.

well the human voice, the music, the singing, and any kind of sounds.”<sup>2</sup> This novel machine allowed the user to record sound projected by the performer and to play back the message encrypted on cylinder records. The new technology prompted much cultural commentary on the nature and significance of sound and would modify cultural norms of listening as well as the auditory environment of the city.

My project is inspired by theories developed in the field of the history of sound, hearing, and modern aurality; but I am primarily interested in explaining the particularities of Mexican aural modernity. The present work will examine the historical period between 1878 and 1920, beginning with the decade that saw the invention of Edison’s phonograph and ending with the rising popularity of the radio and the development of the broadcasting industry. These decades roughly correspond to two prominent chapters in Mexico’s national narrative: the *epoque* known as Porfiriato (1876–1911) and the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). Each of these moments was marked by a set of social and political issues and witnessed new legal policies that sought to regulate the uses of both technology and public space. By revisiting two periods that are usually examined through the prism of political history, I aim to trace the processes that underpinned the emergence and formation of Mexico’s aural modernity.

This thesis turns to the reception of the phonograph in Mexico City between 1878 and 1913 by examining how the new recording technology altered the aural texture of Mexico City, in the process transforming both auditory and cultural practices. More specifically, I analyze how inhabitants of Mexico City heard the sounds produced by the phonograph and incorporated the new technology into the aural texture of their lives. As we will see, class was central to the shaping of Mexican aural modernity.

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<sup>2</sup> *La Patria* (Mexico, 13<sup>th</sup> October 1878): 3

Though there exists some literature on the Mexico's nineteenth-century media industry, we know next to nothing about the attitudes, views, and concerns of the capital's residents regarding the new permanence and reproducibility of sound, voice, and musical culture — all of which had previously been fleeting and ephemeral, existing in the moment of performance alone. *Sonorous Remnants of the Past* will address three main questions. How did the residents of Mexico City contest and reconfigure the user protocols and presumed meanings that companies from the Global North had developed for the phonograph in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries? What impact did the phonograph have on the reconfiguration of social and spatial listening practices in Mexico City? What, finally, can an emerging Mexican aural modernity tell us about the active adaptation of the talking machine to the social and economic practices of the urban poor between 1870 and 1913? This thesis attempts to explore how the emerging sound recording technologies were incorporated into the aural rhythms of urban life and how — out of contestations over public space and modern sound — a new Mexican aural modernity emerged.

#### PHONOGRAPHIC TECHNOLOGY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

After the decade of the 1970s, a surge of science and technology studies produced an extensive literature on the early days of the phonograph industry in Western countries, particularly the United States and Britain. This canon of texts did not only seek to analyze the changes made to the phonograph's physical components over time and the commercial strategies used to attract an audience, but also contributed to a deeper understanding of the social dynamics that shape technological artifacts and the cultural and economic significance

the talking machine had in the Western world.<sup>3</sup> Following this line of thought, other scholars have expanded the geographic scope of inquiry, attending to the arrival of the phonographic industry beyond the Anglo-European terrain and highlighting the existing dilemma of studying the social configurations of non-Western societies through the use of foreign devices manufactured in highly-technological metropolises.<sup>4</sup> This issue has stirred up old narratives that presume a universal paradigm of technological evolution and a set of normative uses of new technologies.

Conversely, since the 2000s, leading researchers from various disciplines have challenged this determinist view, developing ground-breaking methodologies to analyze how the use of foreign *imported* artifacts can help understand *local* relationships with sound and sound technologies. While the present study assumes a non-teleological stance that regards meanings of technologies as socially constructed, I have relied on the more recent contributions from scholars focused on the study of everyday technology, including the phonograph, and their impact on the Global South at the turn of the twentieth century.

One of the central debates in this current historiographical moment revolves around the role of technological transmission among societies in the Global South and the agency these societies have over the innovation, meaning, and uses of new technologies. For instance, historian David Arnold provides insights into the role that small-scale machines

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<sup>3</sup> Oliver Read and Walter L. Welch, *From Tin Foil to Stereo: Evolution of the Phonograph*, 2d ed (Indianapolis: H. W. Sams, 1976); C. A. Schicke, *Revolution in Sound. A Biography of the Recording Industry* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974); David Morton, *Off the Record. The Technology and Culture of Sound Recording in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Marsha Siefert, "The Audience at Home: The Early Recording Industry and the Marketing of Musical Taste" in James S. Ettema and D. Charles Whitney. *Audience-making: How the Media Create the Audience* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994): 186-214; William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); A. J. Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Alexander Boyden Magoun, "Shaping the Sound of Music: The Evolution of Phonograph Record, 1877-1950", PhD dissertation (University of Maryland, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Michael Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan, eds., *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique, Refiguring American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

played in the making of the modern world and, in particular, India.<sup>5</sup> In his book, he defies the diffusionist model which is based on the idea of a highly industrialized Western world as the seed of technological innovation that disseminates novel technologies to the non-Western world, which then passively replicates metropolitan norms and behaviours. His research also encourages us to examine how new meanings and uses were produced in the process of technological transmission and adaptation and to de-couple the history of technology from Western essentialism. In the same vein, Christina Lubinski and Andreas Steen's comparative study of the phonographic industry in China and India investigates the challenges faced by gramophone companies determined to maintain a uniform business approach, while adapting to the preferences of Asian consumers.<sup>6</sup>

For Arnold, Lubinski, and Steen, sound recording technology arrived as a finished product, exported from industrialized centers to the localities under study. It is only then that the "maturation" process occurred. As they posit, the fierce competition between phonographic companies boosted consumer demand and prompted adaptability to consumers' particular needs and tastes. Using Frank Dikötter's concept of "creative appropriation", David Edgerton's notion of "creole technologies" as well as Walter Ong's idea of a residual orality, these scholars attempt to enhance the versatility of meanings and reactions that the same technology can acquire in different societies, while also analyzing the process of passive or active adoption, hybridity, and assimilation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> David Arnold, *Everyday Technology: Machines and the Making of India's Modernity* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Christina Lubinski and Andreas Steen, "Traveling Entrepreneurs, Traveling Sounds: The Early Gramophone Business in India and China," *Itinerario* 41, no. 2 (August 2017): 275–303. See also Hyungsub Choi, "The Social Construction of Imported Technologies: Reflections on the Social History of Technology in Modern Korea," *Technology and Culture* 58: 4 (December 13, 2017): 905–920.

<sup>7</sup> See, David Arnold, *Everyday Technology*; and Kerim Yasar, *Electrified Voices: How the Telephone, Phonograph, and Radio Shaped Modern Japan, 1868-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

Another dominant theme in studies on the talking machine in the Global South has been the reactions of musicians to the new medium. Scholars in ethnomusicology, folklore, and media studies have debated the contribution of the sound recording industry to musical change outside Anglo-European countries. In “Negotiating ‘His Master’s Voice’”, ethnomusicologist Tan Sooi Beng analyzes the production and dissemination of early records containing traditional Malay songs known as Lagu Melayu.<sup>8</sup> She suggests that the influence of the early music industry promoted a standardization of content that stimulated a fusion of traditional forms with Anglo-American instruments and musical elements and resulted in a new musical idiom of colonial modernity. This syncretism has been theorized in Kerim Yasar’s analysis of the ways in which audio technologies shaped early twentieth-century Japan. For this author, traditions of oral performance became imbricated in, and indistinguishable from, modern auditory technologies. Other authors agree that the influx of talking machines helped popularize long-standing musical practices in urban areas, disseminating multiple dialects and styles, while reshaping performative practices and new musical genres distributed across novel media platforms.<sup>9</sup>

The impact of talking machines on the modern auditory landscape of Mexico has been taken for granted in many scholarly works, with the exception of the brief consideration of the subject by Natalia Bieletto and Sergio Daniel Ospina Romero, whose

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<sup>8</sup> Tan Sooi Beng, “Negotiating ‘His Master’s Voice’: Gramophone Music and Cosmopolitan Modernity in British Malaya in the 1930s and Early 1940s,” *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 169: 4 (January 1, 2013): 457-494.

<sup>9</sup> Kerim Yasar, *Electrified Voices*; Amanda Weidman, “Sound and the City: Mimicry and Media in South India,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20: 2 (2010): 294-313; Stephen Putnam Hughes, “Music in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Drama, Gramophone, and the Beginnings of Tamil Cinema,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66:1 (February 2007): 3-34; S. Suryadi, “The ‘Talking Machine’ Comes to the Dutch East Indies: The Arrival of Western Media Technology in Southeast Asia,” *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 162: 2-3 (January 1, 2006): 269-305; Danka R Lajić-Mihajlović and Smiljana Ž Đorđević-Belić, “Singing with Gusle Accompaniment and the Music Industry: The First Gramophone Records of Gusle Players’ Performances (1908-1931/2),” *Muzikologija* 20 (January 1, 2016): 199-222.

doctoral theses have strongly influenced my work.<sup>10</sup> Ospina Romero's analysis of the recording expeditions of the Victor Talking Machine Company through Latin America focuses on the company's trips to Mexico in the early twentieth century. He argues that phonographic performances of Mexican artists recorded in the metropolis contained impersonations of regional accents and popular references that evoked sonic indexes of indigeneity and rural environments. For him, these elements were performative features that mediated Victor's imperial schemes to dismiss this music under the ethnic brand label. Bieletto, in turn, examines how the Mexican elite reshaped existing relationships with auditory practices while also altering patterns of class formation and city dwellers' relationship with urban space.

Faced with the question of whether this case is unique to Mexican soil or part of a broader process, my study introduces some of the key figures in the study of early phonographic industry in the Hispanic world. It is fair to say that this topic has received much less attention from scholars, having only recently been addressed in historical and musicological works. Santiago Videla has traced the circulation of early talking machines in nineteenth-century Buenos Aires, while Jaddiel Diaz has examined the cultural impact of these devices and the processes of intermediality.<sup>11</sup> Another important contributor to the history of sound recording technology in the Hispanic world is the musicologist Eva Moreda Rodriguez whose research examines the influence that such technology had on modernization and nationalist discourses in Spain. In particular she addresses the issues of

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<sup>10</sup> Natalia Bieletto-Bueno, "‘Es Siempre Preferible La Carpa a La Pulquería’: The Construction of Poverty in the Music of the Carpas Shows in Mexico City, 1890-1930", PhD dissertation (University of California-Los Angeles, 2015); Sergio Ospina Romero, "Recording Studios on Tour: The Expeditions of the Victor Talking Machine Company through Latin America, 1903-1926", PhD dissertation, (Cornell University, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Santiago Videla, "Del Juguete Sonoro Al Teatro En Casa. Los Inicios Del Fonografismo En La Ciudad De Buenos Aires," *L.I.S. Letra. Imagen. Sonido. Ciudad Mediatizada* 3 (June 1, 2009): 45-58; Jaddiel Diaz Frene, "A Las Palabras Ya No Se Las Lleva El Viento: Apuntes Para Una Historia Cultural Del Fonógrafo En México (1876-1924)", *Historia mexicana* 66:1 (2016): 257-298.



mobility, regional differences, and stage versus recording practices, using a collection of 358 home-made recordings held at the Catalunya's Library in Barcelona.<sup>12</sup>

For the most part, though, the literature on the history of the phonograph in Latin America consists of descriptive analyses of documentary sources and is written mainly from the point of view of the phonographic companies active in the region. However, scholars such as Moreda Rodríguez, Francisco Garrido, and Renato Menare have produced innovative works on the constitution of *gabinetes fonográficos*, independent workshops for the production of local records established long before the arrival of the multinational industry's record plants.<sup>13</sup> This line of research not only offers insights into early recording laboratories and their decisions about what type of live music performances to record, but also reveals overlooked associations among amateur recording technicians and theatre stage actors which have yet to be explored in a more extensive manner.

#### MEXICO CITY AND THE EARLY SOUND RECORDING TECHNOLOGY

As the historiography surrounding the arrival of early recording technologies to non Euro-American countries suggests, an anti-deterministic approach is best suited to revealing the social dynamics that influenced the creation of the phonograph. Although these interpretations evince the intrinsic relationship between the phonograph and its distribution network through the routes of colonial trade and expansion, they mistakenly assume that only “finished” phonographic technology arrived in the Global South and that there was little variation in the normative uses of the new technology. They also create a false

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<sup>12</sup> Eva Moreda Rodríguez, *Inventing the Recording: The Phonograph and National Culture in Spain, 1877-1914* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021); Eva Moreda Rodríguez, “Amateur Recording on the Phonograph in Fin-De-Siècle Barcelona: Practices, Repertoires and Performers in the Regordosa-Turull Wax Cylinder Collection.” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 145, no. 2 (2020): 385–415.

<sup>13</sup> Francisco J. Garrido Escobar and Renato D. Menare Rowe, “Efraín Band y Los Inicios de La Fonografía En Chile,” *Revista Musical Chilena* 68: 221 (June 2014): 52–78.

dichotomy that positions traditional musicians vis-à-vis recording technicians, as if local performers were indifferent to the use of phonographic devices. Ultimately, such an approach obscures the agency that local musicians wielded when experimenting with the new technology. At the same time, this approach is oblivious to the sensibilities and nuances that become evident only when analysing the reception and attitudes of the regional users across class and community networks.

In the history that unfolds in the following pages, I explore how the emerging sound recording technologies were negotiated in urban spaces and contributed to the creation of a Mexican aural modernity between 1878 and 1913. I also examine how the inhabitants of this Mexican metropolis conceptualized, conceived of, and experienced the newly “canned” sounds, paying special attention to what changes occurred in the aural culture of early twentieth-century Mexico. In so doing, I hope to provide a more complex interpretation of the role of multinational networks and the influence of international players in technological development.

Due to its geopolitical positioning, the Mexican case presents a unique case study, located as the country was within the sphere of influence of the United States while also maintaining strong cultural and economic bonds with Europe and Latin America. Unlike Europe, Mexico benefited from the influx of talking machines from companies as varied as Pathé, Victor, Columbia, and Edison, with not a single company able to monopolize the musical record industry. A further motive to choose Mexico City as the site of my micro-historical work was the distinctive nature of the metropolis and its ability to call into question the narrative of a linear process of aural modernization that was directly transmitted from the Western world. Instead, Mexico City featured a complex social configuration, comprised of a robust elite and upper-class, a growing presence of businessmen and foreign

entrepreneurs, as well as a pattern of internal migration from the countryside to urban areas, which resulted in an increasing population of working-class residents with rural roots as well as indigenous groups. Thus, in this work I deliberately choose to review the methods of acquisition, circulation, and distribution of phonographic products in urban spaces across social classes and communal systems, focusing in particular on the changes that occurred since the arrival of the talking machine in the configuration of an aural modernity and the reformulation of a modern auditory landscape in Mexico.

My study places the mechanical production of sound and hearing at the center of analysis, drawing upon theories and methodologies developed in the fields of the history of sound, listening, and modern aurality. It is based on a comprehensive body of multidisciplinary research and consistent with the view that the study of sonic phenomena should include music, sound, noise, as well as silence. While I was tempted to examine the archival collections of Mexican recordings made during this period, I agree with Jonathan Sterne that the scope of this study should not revolve around trying to recover the interior experience of listening.<sup>14</sup> Instead, I employ Ana Maria Ochoa's notion of *aurality*<sup>15</sup> and Jonathan Sterne's categorization of modern sound to inform the present work.<sup>16</sup> Thus, I aim

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<sup>14</sup> In the methodological considerations that seek to recover the sonorous past, two currents have been developed to investigate the changes occurred in the auditory landscape over time. The first of them formulated by Murray Schafer entails the quest for the acoustic properties of the past using as benchmarks those textual sources from people who perform as "earwitnesses". The detractors of this approach consider that it disguises the cultural and historical context, hiding listener's agency and perception in an attempt to demonstrate objectivity. The scholar Jonathan Sterne proposes instead to consider the cultural and social circumstances that dictate the significance of sound. See, John M Picker, "Soundscape(s): The Turning of the World", in Michael Bull (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies* (London: Routledge, 2018):147-157.

<sup>15</sup> Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014): 5.

<sup>16</sup> According to Jonathan Sterne, "in the modern age, sound and hearing were reconceptualized, objectified, imitated, transformed, reproduced, commodified, mass-produced, and industrialized." It is in this time where "sound becomes a problem: an object to be contemplated, reconstructed, and manipulated, something that can be fragmented, industrialized, and bought and sold." Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 2-9. See also, Emily Ann Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900 - 1933*,

to understand local responses to the phonographic technology and the active role Mexico City's residents played in adapting the phonograph to their needs and incorporating the new technology into the rhythms of their lives.

*Sonorous Remnants of the Past* is divided into two chapters. The first chapter examines the formative stage of the phonograph industry, starting in 1878 with the introduction of the Edison's first sound recording device to Mexico City and ending in 1900 after Edison's wax phonograph had begun to alter the city's auditory landscape. I contend that the circulation of the phonograph in Mexico City set into motion two processes. Government officials and the city's upper-class residents welcomed the phonograph as a business dictation tool and communication system. To Mexico's cultural and social elites, the phonograph represented a symbol of modernity and progress. Yet, as the phonograph was adopted by wider circles of the population in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, such high-class concepts of listening practices were being called into question. As the phonograph became more widely accessible, it crystallized new notions of listening and sound production which became incorporated into both popular and consumer culture. In this formative period emerged the social and cultural conditions that would be central for the shaping of Mexican aural modernity.

The second chapter examines the consolidation stage of the sound-recording industry in Mexico City, beginning with the construction of Edison's Mexican National Phonograph Company in 1900 and ending in 1913, the year when civil war reached an already dilapidated Mexico City. As I claim, the technological development for disk replication enhanced the efforts of multinational companies, keen to control the recording market in

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(Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008) and Jonathan Sterne, "Audible Scarification: On Cultures of Loudness and the Normalization of Altered Hearing" (Keynote conference presented at the Vibrations Symposium, Concordia University, Montreal, 30 November 2018).

Mexico and to own the legal rights to phonograph records. Confronted with locally-constituted music recording labels that had been established as early as 1890, the National Phonograph Company, the Columbia Phonograph Company, and the Victor Talking Machine Company began to rethink their standards of musical uniformity, tailoring their products to local musical tastes. Based on a close reading of records created by itinerant recording engineers, I argue that the supply system, which encompassed manufacturing, standardization, and distribution, revealed the presence of local aural cultures in the metropolis. More specifically, I suggest that the capital's residents adapted the device in accordance with local economic and cultural codes.

My research is based mainly on an analysis of documentary sources and archival material, including the holdings of the National Archive of Mexico and Mexico City local state archive that contain reports of phonograph licenses, civil proceedings, citizen's letters and complaints, as well as urban planning dossiers. National and local Mexican newspapers published between 1877 and 1918 were also examined, along with other publications such as traveler's guides and legal compendiums. In addition, I consulted archival and library collections outside of Mexico, including the National Phonograph Company's archival collection of the Thomas Edison National Historical Park (West Orange, New Jersey) and "The Papers of Thomas A. Edison" at Rutgers University (New Jersey). These archival materials covered epistolary communications, legal disputes, and recording scouts' correspondence. This research base was rounded out by holdings from the Library of Congress (Washington), the New York Public Library (New York), and the Hagley Museum and Library (Wilmington, Delaware). Other relevant sources accessed in the course of this work include the digital audio archives at the University of California-Santa Barbara that provided information on the discographic cataloguing of historical recordings produced

in Mexico. These archives were examined in conjunction with the digital photographic collection of the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexico City.

As a close reading of this wide-ranging source base suggests, the process of technological transmission did not constitute a unilateral transfer of finished products and established operational codes from the United States to Mexico. Instead, the Mexican case exemplifies the active role played by Mexican cultural and economic elites, musicians, petty entrepreneurs, and audiences in the conversion of the phonograph's physical components, the contestation over sound in public urban spaces, and the adaptations of the new technology's uses to regional cultural and social norms.

#### A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In the discussion that follows, I use the term *talking machine* or *phonograph* to refer to the nineteenth-century invention capable of recording sound projected directly to a vibrating diaphragm (speaker cone) and engraving —through indentation or incision— a unique pattern on a suitable surface such as tin foil, wax, or shellac. The resulting etched cover could reproduce the sound, audible for an audience that found resemblance with the original.<sup>17</sup> Included in this category are the following devices:

1. *Phonograph*: Thomas Alva Edison's mechanism of a *vertical indenting* stylus that grooved the surface of a tin foil, and later, of a wax cylinder, mounted on a rotating canister.
2. *Graphophone*: This invention of the Volta Laboratory's associates, Charles Tainter and Chichester Bell, was based on Edison's principle. Using an iron cylinder, the vibrating diaphragm embedded grooves by using a cardboard tube coated in wax

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<sup>17</sup> Oliver Read and Walter L. Welch, *From Tin Foil to Stereo*:13.

through an *incising* stylus. One of the innovative features of this device was the continuous rpm speed turntable that added stability to the rotating surface.

3. *Gramophone*: Emile Berliner's sound reproducing machine consisted of a lateral recording through a photoengraved process that was different from the up-and-down vibrations of the previous machines. The novelty of this side-by-side system was the use of a flat disc and a reproducing horn that made global distribution possible.
4. Other terms like *zonophone* (recording label) and *victrola* (Berliner's 1906 model) were famous models and labels with which the public identified talking machines at the beginning of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE BEGINNING OF PHONOGRAPHY IN MEXICO (1878-1900)

The night of October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1878 marked the official introduction of the phonograph to a select Mexico City audience. In a pamphlet distributed to passersby and printed in the local newspapers, the American entrepreneurs J. W. Wexel and Frank DeGress invited the public to hear, for the cost of one peso, “the machine that talks” in conjunction with two other novel technological creations at the Teatro of the Netzahualcoyotl’s Society. Acting as the representatives of the American inventor Thomas Alva Edison, the two businessmen aimed to familiarize Mexican audiences with Edison’s recently created tin foil phonograph, a machine able to reproduce, store, and repeat the human voice “a million times”.<sup>1</sup>

In Mexico, news of the arrival of Edison’s telephone, phonograph, and microphone perplexed the Capitalino residents, producing a torrent of speculation about a mechanism that made it possible to amplify and capture the human voice. In the summer of 1878, Mexican journalists joined the world’s media in announcing the creation of the first phonograph and conjecturing about the nature and potential applications of the apparatus. Their descriptions of the machine’s operation suggest a developing discourse about the meaning and functionality of sound that permeated the accounts of well-educated Mexicans. As scholars have argued, the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a crystallization of narratives and artifacts that confronted old ways of understanding the nature of sound and human listening.<sup>2</sup> In building upon this scholarship, this study examines the arrival of the

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<sup>1</sup> Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal (hereafter AHDF). Diversiones Publicas en General, Book 801, File 587. Frank DeGress appears as Francis DeGress in the archival documents.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in The Edison Era* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999); Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).



first sound recording devices to Mexico City during the formative period of this technology between the years 1878 and 1900.

This chapter provides an overview of the innovative local responses of the capital's residents to the presumed usage of the phonograph. It demonstrates the fluidity of relationships between American inventors, their agents, and Mexican users of the phonograph. The first two sections of this chapter examine the expectations, attitudes, and opinions of Mexico City's residents who first encountered the tin-foil and wax cylinder phonographs in public exhibitions. I argue that during the first years of circulation of Edison's invention, the technological transmission was centered on promoting it as a voice-message communication system that proved to be highly lucrative for the Mexican industrial elite. As the phonograph became more widely available, its proposed applicability changed, and the high-class norms of listening practices were being called into question. Next, this chapter explores the new forms of salesmanship derived from the high-end retail practices in the mercantile houses that offered the phonograph for sale. Finally, this chapter demonstrates how despite the efforts of cultured and economic elites to reserve use of the new technology only for "cultivated" people, working-class communities asserted their presence in the city's public spaces, subverted the elite's control, and embraced phonography to their own ends.

#### EDISON'S TIN-FOIL PHONOGRAPH ARRIVES IN MEXICO

The premiere of the first talking machine in Mexico in 1878 coincided with the exploratory phase of sound recording technology, characterized by a highly speculative period in which trained lecturers and agents promoted the device's profitability in the phonographic industry. As one of the main importers of American ammunition to Mexico, J. Wexel and Frank DeGress acted as legal representatives of Thomas A. Edison's inventions in Mexico. They

marketed the potential usability of the phonograph for business rather than an object of entertainment. Their familiarity with the Mexican market and local cultural practices allowed them to benefit from their established associations with top-ranking entrepreneurs and local government officers to attract investment capital. In promoting the new technology, the American investors sought to introduce the phonograph to an audience consisting of local political elites, commercial interests, and the aspiring middle and professional classes.

On the night of the scientific wonder's demonstration, the devices on display were introduced with a detailed biography of the man who had invented them, following a rhetorical formula used in other phonographic exhibitions. For that purpose, Wexel and DeGress appointed two reputed representatives of the American expatriate community, the dentist Edward Clay Wise and the electrician F. E. Beardslee whose presence encouraged the attendance of other members of the growing *Colonia Americana*, an important contingent of the financial and economic elites in Mexico.<sup>3</sup>

The American impresarios opted for the theatre hall of the Netzahualcoyotl society as the setting for the scientific exhibition's first presentation. Two subsequent showcases took place at the Teatro Principal, a venue that usually attracted *gente decente* (respectable people) and supporters of cultural events. The upscale pricing of most of the tickets at the theater prevented lower and middle-class audiences from participating in the exhibitions, although they were able to read about the event in the extensive contemporary press coverage.

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<sup>3</sup> J. G. Puron, "Teléfonos, Fonógrafos y Micrófonos", *El Combate. Periódico de Política, Variedades y Anuncios*, (Mexico, 13th October 1878): 1-3.

During the demonstration, the emphasis was on the fact that the phonograph could bring to life — not only once but multiple times — sounds stored on the tin foil sheet. Wise and Beardslee carried out different experiments to demonstrate the extensive range of noises that the phonograph could record and reproduce. Conversations, bugle-calls, whistles, cries, shouts imitating different animals, and the Mexican National anthem intoned with a thick English accent, La Marseillaise, and even the Aida’s Triumphant March from Verdi’s opera were reproduced that night for an amazed audience that later related their impressions to local papers.<sup>4</sup>

The scene was repeated at the Teatro Principal, the main music hall of Mexico City. As an entertainment venue that regularly played host to the president’s cabinet and his wealthy family’s entourage, the opera house had developed strict protocols regarding the type of audience allowed in each section and the proper social and gender etiquette.<sup>5</sup> Elite families in Mexico City booked monthly subscription bonuses to have first-class access to the more prestigious boxes which provided an opportunity to indicate distinction while at the same time offering a private secluded space to discuss current political affairs with other distinguished guests. In breaking with precedent, the second phonographic demonstration subverted the conventional audience’s code at the Principal Theater, allowing access to

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<sup>4</sup> Manuel M. Romero, “Revista Dominical”, *El Combate. Periódico de Política, Variedades y Anuncios*, (Mexico, 20th October 1878): 1.

<sup>5</sup> In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the formation of philharmonic societies in Mexico consolidated the emergence of an increasingly specialized audience that regularly attended theater. Opera was especially associated with the Mexican elite’s civilizing project and with the increase in the price of admission to the venue during the second half of the century, such entertainment became the epitome of status, distinction, and culture. See, Áurea Maya. “La herencia cultural de la ópera mexicana del siglo XIX” en Ricardo Miranda y Aurelio Tello (coord.), *La música en los siglos XIX y XX* (México: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2013): 81-111; Luis de Pablo Hammeken and Clara E. Lida, *La República de la Música: Ópera, Política y Sociedad en el México del Siglo XIX*, Primera edición, Pùblica Històrica 9 (Mexico: Bonilla Artigas Editores, 2018).

anyone who could afford the price of admission: from six pesos for boxes and plateau seats to .50 and .25 pesos for the places at the tertulia and gallery.<sup>6</sup>

Criticisms were not long in coming. Some journalists relayed concerns of members of the audience who felt that “contrary to the tradition in this type of entertainments, there were no ostentatious programmes being handed out, no diligent friends of the businessmen, who extolled skills, predicted surprises or in any way aroused curiosity.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, middle-class audience members expressed their discomfort that they had to jostle for seats as, contrary to the usual hall’s protocol, “the lunettes were unnumbered, each one sitting down and settling in as they arrived.”<sup>8</sup>

The critiques exposed the confluence of different ways of understanding public sociability. Through their unconventional presentation, Wexel and DeGress responded to changing attitudes towards consumer culture in vogue during the last quarter of the nineteenth century in the United States. This new perspective aimed to appeal to a broader audience with no restriction as to gender, ethnicity, residence, or occupation. As David Nasaw suggests, scientific demonstrations “were public in the sense that they belonged to no particular social group, exciting enough to appeal to the millions, and respectable enough to offend no one.”<sup>9</sup> In dispensing with established customs of hierarchy and prestige, the ticket

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<sup>6</sup> The architectural design of the Mexican theater emanates from the Spanish tradition, which contemplates different sections in relation to the stage. The section called *luneta* or *plateau* for its half-moon shape was formed by three curved rows of single-board benches located on the ground floor. Above these seats were the *palcos*, boxes or self-contained balconies that allowed privacy and distinction. On the third floor there was a separate section called *tertulia*, reserved only for the secular authority and the high aristocracy. Finally, the top floor belonged to the section known as the *galeria* or gallery, reserved exclusively for women and men of the lower classes, separated by gender. See, Elizabeth M. Petersen, “Designed for an Experience: The Natural Architecture of Corrales,” *Comedia Performance* 7:1 (2010): 170–99.

<sup>7</sup> Guillermo Prieto, “El Fonógrafo”, *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*, (Mexico, 21st October 1878): 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> David Nasaw, *Going Out. The Rise and the Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993): 5.

sale provoked a strong unfavourable reaction, with most voices decrying the break with tradition.<sup>10</sup>

This was not the only frustration voiced on opening night. The audience was also dissatisfied with a demonstration that consisted mostly of a tedious repetition of phonographic experiments and felt deprived of the dancing sessions and musical interludes that normally formed part of evening entertainments. Several listeners professed their disenchantment with the quality of sound played by the machine. In attributing the poor sonic quality to Wise's English accent, they postulated that the phonograph might be better suited to the properties of the Spanish language or the register of the female voice. Conversely, audience members at other demonstrations found the clarity of sound much improved when the machine was "adjusted" by a skilled operator to differing vocal cadences. Those who witnessed the scene recounted how the tin foil reproduced the temporary hoarseness of the singer. This caused an enormous stir in the audience that was impressed by the cruel honesty of the apparatus in exposing the defects of the human voice.<sup>11</sup>

The audience's vocal response to the embarrassing performance should be situated in the context of listening practices in nineteenth-century Mexico. Any criticism of an artist's musical interpretation or performance was remarked upon, shouted at, or expressed through the hitting of dress canes on the floor. Cries, shouts, and hoorays provided the soundtrack

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<sup>10</sup> To explore the social relations inside the main music hall during the nineteenth century Mexico, see: Luis de Pablo Hammeken and Clara E. Lida, *La República de la Música*; Laura Suárez de la Torre, *Los papeles para Euterpe: la música en la Ciudad de México desde la historia cultural, siglo XIX*, (Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora, 2014); Ricardo Miranda and Aurelio Tello (coord.), *La música en los siglos XIX y XX* (Mexico: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Juvenal. "Charla de los domingos", *El Monitor Republicano* (Mexico, 20th October 1878): 1.

for the musical scenery where the audience developed a variety of responses to communicate its pleasure or disenchantment with artistic performances.<sup>12</sup>

Despite these vigorous criticisms, American entrepreneurs modelled their ‘scientific exhibitions’ after the tenets of an emerging consumer culture. They insisted on welcoming a general audience, favoured the didactic method over musical entertainment, and used specific sonic examples to demonstrate the potential of the phonograph. Contrary to the practice of the capital’s operagoers, the marketing model developed during the early stages of the phonographic invention established new guidelines to promote the device’s profitability in the industry.

Contemporary newspaper coverage reveals not only different listening practices, but also deep-rooted discussions among the Mexican *intelligentsia* about politics and music. Throughout the nineteenth century, debates regarding the self-governance of the former Spanish colony permeated various sectors of the Mexican public sphere. Various political factions used the weekly meeting at the city theater as a partisan arena to express their beliefs about the direction of the nation. The selection of the Mexican National Anthem, La Marseillaise, and Aida’s Triumphant March during the phonograph demonstration carried meaningful implications. The music-loving public was very familiar with the ideological profile of European composers such as Giuseppe Verdi. In this sense, the republicans used musical codes to distinguish themselves from the imperialists, exposing the connections between the aesthetic expression of Verdian composition—a staunch believer in republican ideas—and those who agreed with these same principles.<sup>13</sup> As most of these pieces had been

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<sup>12</sup> Susan E. Bryan. “Teatro Popular y Sociedad durante el Porfiriato”, *Historia Mexicana* 1:33 (july-september, 1983): 130-169.

<sup>13</sup> Luis de Pablo Hammeken, “Ópera y política en el México decimonónico. El caso de Amilcare Roncari”, *Secuencia* 97 (january-april, 2017): 140-169.

played in the streets during civic parades in the second half of the century, Wexel and DeGress' music selection reinforced subtle correlations between patriotic and nationalistic symbols and the regime's pro-secularization and anti-clerical projects. The message was loud and clear. Wexel and DeGress hoped to gain the support of progressive Mexican industrial elites, businessmen, state leaders, and technocrats known as *Científicos*.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the American entrepreneurs aimed at benefitting from the established local sonic codes and practices to gain investment capital through phonographic concessions in Mexico.

The display of Edison's technological wonders at the Netzahualcoyotl and Principal Theaters at the end of 1878 spread the news of the ability of the talking machine to perpetuate the human voice. The publicity for the engraved phonographic foil piece attracted financiers interested in the suitability of the sheet to create a flow of information to help local businesses. This growing curiosity led to private demonstrations of the sonic device in casinos, literary societies, and private houses, where recorded foil sheets were distributed among the Porfirian elites as musical souvenirs, gaining recognition as a promising device potentially applicable in any business circumstance.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the tin foil could store the sonic message only for a short time and frequently failed to replay the piece embedded in the grooves. The capability of the phonograph for practical application in the industry was rather weak due to the fragility of the material, which could be damaged when removed from the rotating cylinder. The strong evidence of a machine that could not keep

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<sup>14</sup> Jorge H. Jimenez, "The Private Business of Porfirio Díaz and the Early Modernization of Mexico, 1876-1911", PhD dissertation (University of Texas El Paso, 2012) Open Access Theses & Dissertations. [[https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open\\_etd/2110](https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd/2110)].

<sup>15</sup> The journalist Guillermo Prieto describes in detail a private session occurred on October 23rd, 1878. The audience consisted of secretaries of state, political, and scientific leaders: "Ignacio Mariscal, Joaquín Alcalde, Luis Méndez, Manuel G. Prieto, Mariano Bárcena, Gumesino Mendoza, Pedro Santacilia, Francisco Urquidi, José Antonio Gamboa, Lomelí" in Guillermo Prieto. "El Fonógrafo", *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*, (Mexico, 23rd October 1878): 3.

up to the expectations of customers led American and Mexican investors to withdraw their capital. The fervor for the phonograph slowly faded away.<sup>16</sup>

#### A SECOND CHANCE: THE WAX CYLINDER AND THE NEW PHONOGRAPH

By the end of the 1880s, the proliferation of new materials and operational designs led to the invention of a novel engraving method to decrypt sound etched in a wax coated cylinder.

These methods and materials were a distinguishing feature present in both the graphophone and gramophone which had been patented by Edison's competitors after 1886. This, in turn, forced Thomas A. Edison to resume his experiments on sound and continue with the work on his initial phonograph. When Edison introduced his improved recording machine in 1889, he did so in a period of dramatic social and economic change. The interregnum had witnessed several political and economic transformations in Mexico, which had an impact on the life of the metropolis' urban population.

Historical writing on the Porfirian period describes the last two decades of the nineteenth-century as an epoch characterized by a significant expansion of manufacturing and extractive industries, the establishment of banking institutions, and an increased circulation of money. A constant flow of American consumer goods through the Northern border fuelled the desire of the country's upper and middle classes to embody the values and attitudes of a modern society.

The resulting foreign and local investments made possible the expansion of communication and transportation systems that connected the metropolis with the

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<sup>16</sup> "The inventor — [explains Alexander Boyden Magoun]— abandoned the issue of improving the record for the next seven years. With no further improvements and no practical applications, profits from sales and royalties declined from \$4,450 in 1878 to \$479 in 1880." In Alexander Boyden Magoun, "Shaping the Sound of Music: The Evolution of Phonograph Record, 1877-1950", PhD dissertation (University of Maryland, 2000): 52.



countryside. The industrialization process and the consequent privatization of the land triggered migratory waves of rural working-class people, peasants, and members of indigenous communities to Mexico City.<sup>17</sup> The influx of rural labourers went hand in hand with the city's rapid industrialization and prompted government efforts to regulate the urban population and increase the civilian police force. According to Christina M. Jimenez, "as growing numbers of urban poor turned to the informal vending economy for their livelihood, elite vision of urban public space increasingly came into conflict with popular claims to those same central locations after 1890 and escalating in the 1910s."<sup>18</sup>

In order to strengthen his foothold in the Mexican market, Edison's recently formed Phonograph Company entered negotiations with Porfirio Diaz's second administration (1884-1911). Modernity, progress, and cosmopolitanism were tropes at the core of these negotiations that resulted in the granting of a ten-year concession to Edison, who was to supply the Mexican government with new phonogram blank cylinders for use in government post offices. Edison's Company committed to supplying "at least 1000 Phonograph during the first year at a price to be agreed on but not exceeding fifty dollars per instrument".<sup>19</sup> Although the agreement was signed in late 1888, Thomas A. Edison did not fulfill the terms of the contract until a year later. Edison was hesitant to obtain a license

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<sup>17</sup> Gustavo Garza states that in Mexico City, urban development projects like sewage and water supply systems, lighting and electric energy, urban transportation, railroads, and paved roads were initiated during the Porfiriato only interrupted during the armed stage of the Revolution in 1913. See, Gustavo G. Garza Merodio. "Technological innovation and the expansion of Mexico City, 1870-1920", *Journal of Latin American Geography* 5:2 (2006): 109-126.

<sup>18</sup> Christina M. Jimenez, "Performing Their Right to the City: Political Uses of Public Space in a Mexican City, 1880-1910s," *Urban History* 33:3 (2006): 10

<sup>19</sup> The Thomas A. Edison Papers Archive. Letter from George E. Gouraud and Thomas Alva Edison to Thomas Bernard Connery, November 5th, 1888.

An important precursor to these negotiations was President Diaz's visit to Edison's laboratory in 1883 and the following enterprise to establish an electric system in Mexico. As Jorge H. Jimenez explains, this period marks a milestone in the president's personal entrepreneurial motives that favored the American corporate elites. State agreements, congressional grants, constitutional amendments, and special privileges were dispensed to enable modernization projects in the country. See, Jorge H. Jimenez. *The Private Business of Porfirio Díaz and the Early Modernization of Mexico*.

abroad before the United States government had deliberated on the patent litigation between Edison Phonograph Co. and the American Graphophone Co. This trial aimed to resolve who held the exclusive right over the central constituent mechanism in both the graphophone and the phonograph.

On November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1889 Thomas B. Connery, representative of Edison Phonograph Co. in Mexico, accompanied by the law counselor Edwin M. Fox, presented the improved technology to the head of the Mexican state. In preparation for the meeting, Connery and the banker Juan M. Ceballos unveiled several phonograms containing different messages from the Spanish and Mexican consulates, high-ranking officials of the Spanish army, and prominent newspaper men recorded in New York in September 1889. The collection also included twenty musical records as well as a personal voice message by Thomas Edison to Porfirio Diaz.<sup>20</sup> In the meeting, Secretary of State Manuel Romero Rubio ratified the former agreement with Edison's company, granting a fifteen-year exclusive provider contract of cylinders for the use of the device in the mailing service. The document established that the company would assume the costs of installation, conservation, and repair of the machines. The Edison team committed to teaching the operation process of the phonographs and phonograms to the Postal Office employees and installing at least one recording device in every branch office scattered across the country. For its part, the Mexican government agreed to pay a usage fee of four pesos per phonograph. After this payment, ten per cent of the earnings would be allocated to the government and the remaining ninety per cent to the corporation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "Audición Fonográfica", *El Universal*, (Mexico, 9th October 1889): 2; "Letter from Edwin M. Fox to Thomas Alva Edison, October 5th, 1889," *Edison Papers Digital Edition*, accessed 8th August 2019, [<http://edison.rutgers.edu/digital/document/D8961AAO>].

<sup>21</sup> "El Fonógrafo de Edison en México", *El Universal*, (Mexico, 13th November 1889): 2.

Akin to what had happened ten years earlier, the publication of this contract in the prominent newspapers of the capital prompted a response from local leaders, politicians, and financiers, who speculated about the presumed uses of the blank cylinders. They offered visionary examples such as a use of recording devices to cross-check the bookkeeping of the tickets sold by urban tramway operators to ensure the accuracy of the tram ticket's account. Other contemporary publications extolled the benefits of phonography as a legal instrument that could ensure the integrity of inheritances and the preservation of wills.<sup>22</sup> The journalistic evidence points to a growing anxiety in the commercial sphere, whose endeavor was directed towards the protection and veracity of personal data. It is clear that at the end of the century, the phonograph was at the center of discussions of commercial groups aiming to develop an effective method to monitor the productivity in their subsidiary offices. Moreover, the process of industrialization in the metropolis increased the rivalry between firms, forcing businessmen to seek out technology that would avoid any leak of information that could jeopardize their advantage in the market. For them, the phonographic mailing service “would ensure the privacy of the letters, considering that signatures were easier to forge than voice.”<sup>23</sup>

Other observers focused on the potential of the phonograph to convert written messages into audio reproduction, thereby benefitting the illiterate population that would be able to hear the voices of family and friends reproduced *ad infinitum*.<sup>24</sup> The low cost of the service and the sonic nature of the voice-mail would appeal to a large number of newly-

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<sup>22</sup> See, Wanderer, “El Fonógrafo Inventor y Fiscal”, *El Universal* (Mexico, 18th July 1890): 1; Publio Heredia y Larrea, *El Testamento Fonográfico* (Madrid: Imprenta de la Revista Política, 1895).

<sup>23</sup> Jaddiel Diaz Frene, “A Las Palabras Ya No Se Las Lleva El Viento: Apuntes Para Una Historia Cultural Del Fonógrafo En México (1876-1924)”, *Historia mexicana* 66:1 (2016): 266.

<sup>24</sup> As Michael Matthews explains, the literacy rate in Mexico City improved from 38% to 50% during the Diaz administration. In the rest of the country, this rate improved from 14% to 20%. Michael Matthews, “De Viaje: Elite Views of Modernity and the Porfirian Railway Boom”, *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 26:2 (Summer 2010): 251-289.

arrived immigrants in the city.<sup>25</sup> In the eyes of urban developers and technocratic advisers, the use of the phonograph by the mailing industry would benefit that portion of the migrant population that spoke an indigenous language. The apparatus would make possible the transmission of languages that had previously been considered unintelligible and allow for the gradual assimilation of linguistic and ethnic groups into a new (standardized) Mexican aural modernity.

Mexican elites had long been dismissive of indigenous ways of speaking and voiced concerns over the presumed contamination of the Spanish language with indigenous orality. Instead of a hybrid language, Mexican elites heard unsettling vocalizations, which, as Ana María Ochoa has argued, were characterized as “out of tune, difficult to classify as either language or song, [with] improper Spanish accents that did not conform to a supposed norm, sounds of indigenous languages for which there were no signs in the Spanish alphabet, and abundance of noises or “voices” coming from natural entities that seemed to overwhelm the senses.”<sup>26</sup>

The long-awaited inauguration of the phonographic postal service planned for February 1890 was postponed time and again. As a newspaper reported, the reason for this extension could be found in a shortfall in wax cylinder production. Instead, the company sent an engraved phonograph to the State Secretary with the following inscription: “*This phonograph is presented to Señor Manuel Romero Rubio. By its inventor. Edison*”.<sup>27</sup>

Another possible explanation of the deferral of production was the contract signed between

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014): 5. For similar concerns of over ethnic and linguistic hybrid processes during the nineteenth century, see Aimée Boutin, *City of Noise: Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris*, Studies in Sensory History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015) and Barbara Lorenzkowski, *Sounds of Ethnicity. Listening to German North America 1850–1914* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> “Un regalo de Edison”, *La Voz de México*, (Mexico, 31st August 1890): 3.

Jesse H. Lippincott and Thomas A. Edison to supply talking machines to the recently constituted North American Phonograph Company. With this agreement, the company assumed control of the distribution and sale of Edison's phonographs as well as the machines invented by the American Graphophone Company. Although the project of creating a Mexican phonographic postal service ultimately failed, North American Phonograph Company had established political and economic alliances that made possible the distribution of graphophones and phonographs to an eager Mexican market.

#### REFINED MEXICAN EARS AND THE BUSINESS MARKET

Like many of Latin America's most important cities, Mexico was planned around a simple street grid, centered on a plaza called Zocalo which was surrounded by administrative, religious, and commercial buildings. In 1890, the area around the Zocalo played a fundamental role in the urban economic trade. Its main roads — Plateros and San Francisco — were lined by elegant businesses that constituted the city's commercial center, specializing in the advertisement and distribution of select foreign and local consumer goods and featuring some of the most elegant restaurants, cafes, and hotels in the city. Jewelers, seamstresses, tailors, and novelty merchants established outlets to attract the Porfirian upper crust.

In that same year, George W. Cook — favored by his friendship with government officials — became the exclusive Mexican agent for Mosler Safe Company. Under the name of Mosler, Bowen, & Cook, the firm settled in a building, located at the corner of San Francisco and Vergara. It offered security equipment, later expanding its inventory to include electrical products, home furnishings, and patented inventions from the North

American Phonograph Co.<sup>28</sup> The location of Mosler, Bowen & Cook was described in J. Figueroa Doménech's book as one of the most luxurious in the capital. Inside, the splendid rooms featured several specialities such as the *Smith Premier* typewriter, the *Cleveland* bicycle, and sophisticated oak furniture for the private and commercial residences.<sup>29</sup>

Attracting high-class patrons, the Edison exhibition parlours were “decorated not with items for sale but with framed posters and photographs of Edison, the current program selection, and a sign inviting passerby to “walk-in”, admission free. The décor was somewhere between that of a fancy saloon and a hotel or theater lobby, with potted palms, ceiling fans, and quasi-oriental rugs.”<sup>30</sup>

These mercantile houses were part of a new phonographic retail model based on the commodification of sound for entertainment purposes. The success of previous local talking machines businesses in United States had allowed Jesse H. Lippincott's company to abandon the presumed usage of this machine as a dictation device and, instead, embrace the sound recording technology as a musical tool.<sup>31</sup> The phonographic company's advertisement and distribution in the Mexican *capital* aimed to attract the members of the Porfirian elite. The company promoted its products with a variety of selling packages which offered “various phonograph combination outfits” for office and domestic use, whose cost ranged between 170 and 350 dollars. These machines were advertised under the *motto* “one household at a

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<sup>28</sup> William Schell, *Integral Outsiders: The American Colony in Mexico City, 1876-1911* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001): 8 Before the 1890s, indigenous quarters were located on the outskirts of the urban layout. See, Miguel Orduña Carson, “Panorama Urbano de la Exclusión Social, Poder, Clase y Género en las Calles de la Ciudad de México, Siglo XIX”, *Anuario de Historia Regional y de las Fronteras* 18:1 (2013): 13-31.

<sup>29</sup> J. Figueroa Doménech. *Guía General Descriptiva de la República Mexicana* (Barcelona: R. de S. N. Araluce, 1899).

<sup>30</sup> David Nasaw. *Going Out*. 126.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander Boyden Magoun. “Shaping the Sound of Music: The Evolution of Phonograph Record, 1877-1950”; David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009); A. J. Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound*, (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

time” and offered in the form of an installment plan which featured a talking machine, an electric motor and battery, speaking tube, hearing tubes, one four- or eight-way hearing tubes, and a dozen blank cylinders or a selection of recorded musical pieces.<sup>32</sup>

The growth in the marketing and distribution of phonographs and graphophones entailed the sale of a flourishing musical repertoire. In Mexico City, patrons could order their favourite songs from catalogues of the North American Phonograph Co. which included popular melodies performed by brass bands, parlor orchestras, vocal quartets, and instrumental solos.<sup>33</sup> In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, American companies were not yet interested in recording local sound practices, favoring instead business dictation and international musical hits. In Mexico City, visitors to Edison’s exhibition room, much like cultural elites in other countries, cultivated an exclusive musical taste that favoured the classical repertoire. In 1883, news of a recording of the famous opera singer Adelina Patti in New York was received enthusiastically in Mexican newspapers whose readers came from the ranks of the privileged.<sup>34</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, the continuous demand for Mexican and Spanish-language songs prompted the production of a small number of wax cylinders recorded in the United States. The United States Marine Band with John Philip Sousa as its conductor recorded *Sobre las Olas* and *La Media Noche* composed by Juventino Rosas and José Avilés. These musical pieces were not available to individual collectors; instead, they

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<sup>32</sup> The difference between the commercial and domestic plan was the possibility of recording on blank cylinder in the former. The domestic installment plan was for reproducing only, consisting of hearing tubes for an individual experience (single hearing tube) or a collective listening (until 8 pairs of hearing tubes). See, Thomas Edison National Historical Park. “Introductory Catalog”, *Edison Papers Digital Edition*, accessed 8th August 2019, [<http://edison.rutgers.edu/NamesSearch/SingleDoc.php?DocId=CA027E>]

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Edison National Historical Park. “Catalogue of Musical Phonograms”, *Edison Papers Digital Edition*, accessed 8th August 2019, [<http://edison.rutgers.edu/NamesSearch/SingleDoc.php?DocId=CA027C1>]

<sup>34</sup> “La voz de Adelina Patti”, *La Voz de Mexico* (Mexico, 18th July 1893): 3. See also, William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

were rented to exhibitors who charged for each public reproduction.<sup>35</sup> The demand for phonographs and graphophones in distribution outlets across the Spanish-speaking territory forced the head office to promote the creation of repair shops and to circulate illustrated catalogues with detailed description of the operative machinery of the talking machines.<sup>36</sup>

The popularity of the novel sound-recording technology gave rise to new musical practices. As blank records became available, wax cylinders were pressed into service to create Spanish-language recordings as well as home-made cylinders featuring local Mexican musical talent. As early as 1899, an employee of a phonographic workshop in Sao Paulo advertised the option of exchanging used cylinders for blank ones or “scraping” the engraved wax coat to make use of them again.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the invention of a reproducing horn at the Bettini Phonograph Laboratory in 1898 made it possible to improve the sound of personal recordings and thereby facilitating the creation of independent phonographic recording laboratories.

An example of this was the local phonographic industry of Efraín Band Blumenzweig in Chile, which started at the end of the century, driven by the idea of avoiding “the payment to the foreigner [supplier] which was about seventy-five percent of the value of the imported printed cylinders”.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the meaning and practice of the sound recording technology were not exclusively circumscribed by the established protocols of the

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<sup>35</sup> John Koegel. “Grabaciones tempranas de música y músicos mexicanos”, *Discanto: ensayos de investigación musical 2* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 2008): 63-83. To explore sound samples of these musical pieces, see University of California Santa Barbara Cylinder Audio Archive (UCSB CAA). “Over the Waves”, Cylinder 7170, electronic resource, <http://www.library.ucsb.edu/OBJID/Cylinder7170>; UCSB CAA. “La Media Noche”, Cylinder 15130, electronic resource, <http://www.library.ucsb.edu/OBJID/Cylinder7170>

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Edison National Historical Park. “Illustrated Catalogue of Parts of the Phonograph”, *Edison Papers Digital Edition*, accessed 8th August 2019, [<http://edison.rutgers.edu/NamesSearch/SingleDoc.php?DocId=CA027B>]

<sup>37</sup> Juliana Perez Gonzalez, “El espectáculo público de las máquinas parlantes. Fonografía en Sao Paulo, 1878-1902”, *Ensayos, Historia y Teoría del Arte* 22:35 (july-december 2018): 109-132.

<sup>38</sup> Francisco J. Garrido Escobar and Renato D. Menare Rowe, “Efraín Band y Los Inicios de La Fonografía En Chile,” *Revista Musical Chilena* (vol. 68, no. 221, june 2014): 56.



North American Phonograph Co. or subsidiary companies. Instead, the technology was adapted and understood according to local practices of commerce and invention. The phonographic workshops and repair shops offered an alternative to the expensive recordings sold by high-end mercantile houses and opened up the repertoire to songs cherished by working-class audiences. This promoted an active redefinition of the conventional mechanisms of distribution.

**AGENCIA MEXICANA**  
**EDISON**  
*Calle de la Profesa, n.º 2. — MÉXICO*  
**J. GONZÁLEZ MEDINA**



Fonógrafos,  
Grafófonos,  
Kinetoscopios,  
Kinetófonos,  
Proyectorios,  
Aparatos **Rayos X.**  
Baterías eléctricas,  
etc., etc.

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Cinematógrafos  
**Lumier y Edison.**  
Cajas de hierro  
para guardar valores,  
Máquinas  
para escribir,  
Accesorios  
de todas clases para  
máquinas de hablar.

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Esta casa tiene contratados á los mejores cantantes mexicanos y por ello está en condiciones de ofrecer lo mejor en piezas mexicanas para fonógrafos y grafófonos. Se llama la atención sobre este punto.

**GRAFÓFONOS Y FONÓGRAFOS á precios baratos.**

Pidanse catálogos é informes á

**J. GONZÁLEZ MEDINA. — Calle de la Profesa, n.º 2. — MÉXICO**

Figure 1. Advertisement for Agencia Mexicana Edison, J. Figueroa Doménech. *Guía general descriptiva de la República Mexicana* (Mexico, Barcelona (España) R. de S. N. Araluce, 1899):126.

By the turn of the twentieth century, phonographs and graphophones were extending their reach to middle-class and working-class audiences. In Mexico City, the shop of Mosler, Bowen, & Cook, known as the Marshall Field of Mexico, was no longer the only official distributor of sound recording devices. The Edison Mexican Agency, owed by J. Gonzalez Medina, also invited patrons to sample the variety of phonographs, graphophones, kinoscopes, x-ray devices, and electrical batteries in the store [Figure 1]. The advertisement was accompanied by a photograph showing a man ready to engrave the sound of his *guitarra séptima* — fourteen-string guitar — on an Edison phonogram. As the caption announced: “This house has hired the best Mexican singers and therefore is able to offer the best of Mexican pieces for phonographs and graphophones. [...] **Phonographs and graphophones at low prices.**”<sup>39</sup>

As exemplified in the advertisements of the contemporary press, retailers began targeting a broader range of customers to increase the profitability and sales of the sound-reproducing apparatus. The distribution houses adopted a new marketing scheme that involved lowering the price of their products, sponsoring raffles, and enabling the purchase of used devices. This transformation of the phonographic industry focused on welcoming a variety of new customers and was greatly influenced by the popularization of Louis Glass and William S. Arnold’s invention in 1890: an Edison’s modified phonograph that could automatically reproduce a two-minute-musical cylinder after the patron deposited a nickel in the coin slot.

Automatic talking machines were distributed to Mexico through the Edison coin-in-slot phonograph’s catalog which advertised this electric- or motor- powered apparatus as the so-called ‘penny vaudevilles’ due to its association with the poor people’s theatres in vogue.

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<sup>39</sup> J. Figueroa Doménech, *Guía general descriptiva de la República Mexicana*: 126.

The Mexican phonographic retailers were encouraged to open the exhibition spaces — previously considered exclusive sites— to those who could not afford to pay the full cost of the device. The Edison company also reminded its buyers of the untapped opportunities of populous urban markets: “the larger the city, the more crowded the street on which the place is operated, and the greater the number and variety of selections, the more profit there is in the business.”<sup>40</sup> This coin-operated system popularized the phonographic musical amusement in Mexico, driving the demand for devices. At the same time, it contributed to a reclassification of the core principles of the phonographic industry. The American notion of profitability had superseded practices that promoted hierarchy and distinction.

This new mode of salesmanship was a far cry from the exclusive ambiance of the elegant stores lining Plateros and San Francisco streets. The transformation of aural and cultural practices was interwoven with changes in the spatial dynamics of a rapidly modernizing capital. Starting in the decade of 1880, the tendency to segregate the city’s residents based on class was one that coincided with a real estate boom that spurred the creation of several housing developments beyond the capital’s old boundaries. In 1885, almost one-third of the Mexico City’s 330 000 residents lived in precarious dwellings such as tenement buildings, shacks, or huts, made of adobe or wood. The depreciation of family housing combined with high rental costs contributed to a stark inequality reflected in corridors of poverty around the metropolis.<sup>41</sup> As John Lear has noted “many of the elite and middle classes abandoned the traditional multiclass downtown for more exclusive residential neighbourhoods on the western periphery of the city.” Simultaneously, “high rents and

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<sup>40</sup> New York Public Library. Performing Arts Research Collection, Edison coin-slot phonographs [microform], 1905.

<sup>41</sup> John Lear, *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens. The Revolution in Mexico City* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

deliberated policies of demolition pushed many workers and urban poor from the core downtown area to a dense fringe of settlements nearby and to working-class and poor neighbourhoods on the southern and eastern edges of the city.”<sup>42</sup>

As part of its modernization campaign, Porfirio Diaz’s second administration reformed the city’s centre. The financial district surrounding the city’s Zocalo was provided with basic urban infrastructure, including electricity, a public sanitation system, sewers, and telephone lines. These projects transformed the old center of the city from a neighbourhood populated by a mix of wealthy, middling, and working residents into a zone reserved for the city’s capitalist elites. In this re-fashioned urban space, urban dwellers began to jostle over the meanings of sound, commerce, and popular culture.

#### MOBILE PHONOGRAPHY AND STREET COMMERCE

After phonographic companies in Mexico had established a broader marketing scheme and set up a lease-to-own system, poor mestizo and indigenous groups benefited from the reduced price of basic models and were able to operate the sound-reproducing devices in the streets. The ongoing fascination with the phonographic marvel and the circulation of local music cylinders enabled local entrepreneurs to appeal to a variety of pedestrians’ ears. Street commerce and petty entrepreneurship sustained itinerant inhabitants in need of a daily wage to pay for temporary lodgings and provide for their families. The Mexico City council required that anyone wishing to use a phonograph in a public space had to register the patent number and pay for a selling license. The records show an increasing number of

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<sup>42</sup> John Lear. *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens*: 17

licenses granted from 1894 onwards to those who met the necessary criteria and who made explicit the location of their workplace.<sup>43</sup>

Street entrepreneurs could be found in the corner of a bustling street, rent an *accessoria* (independent room with street access), work from one of the *cajones* (rooms used both for commerce and housing), or move between locations.<sup>44</sup> The licence records allow us to recreate vending networks and learn about livelihoods of some exhibitor such as Teofilo Guizar, whose permit allowed him to operate an Edison machine in the Manzanares street by pledging to store the device at night in the *accessoria* number 16 that probably served equally as his living quarters.<sup>45</sup> The historian Christina M. Jimenez suggests that “park, plazas, and especially the *portales* (the central arch-covered walkways) were the most desired locations for vendors who catered to strolling consumers. Although space in city markets remained available, increasing numbers of sellers sought to locate their business in the bustling, newly transformed urban spaces of the city”.<sup>46</sup> The decision as to where to offer their wares remained a key factor for those established and itinerant petty exhibitors who aimed to hold the attention of the passerby. In the urban space, wandering exhibitors shared the same space as provisional and permanent stalls displaying food, beverages, textiles, used goods, and toys. Shoe polishers, water and carbon distributors, loaders, and other service providers moved around the square and among the clientele [Figure 2].<sup>47</sup> In order to attract an audience, petty phonographic hawkers had to project the sound of the phonograph and

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<sup>43</sup> The city ordinances of 1893 were issued to establish clear regulations on the street commerce, to avoid scandalous behaviors and the visibility of immoral conduct in the public space.

<sup>44</sup> Mario Barbosa Cruz, “Insalubres e Inmorales: Alojamiento Temporales en la Ciudad de Mexico, 1900-1920”, *Scripta Nova. Revista Electrónica de Geografía y Ciencias Sociales* 7:146 (August 1st, 2003), accessed February 20th 2021, [[http://www.ub.es/geocrit/sn/sn-146\(053\).htm](http://www.ub.es/geocrit/sn/sn-146(053).htm)]

<sup>45</sup> AHDF. Policía en General, Book 3639, File 1083.

<sup>46</sup> Christina M. Jimenez, “Performing Their Right to the City: Political Uses of Public Space in a Mexican City, 1880-1910s,”: 447

<sup>47</sup> Mario Barbosa Cruz, “Trabajadores en las calles de la Ciudad de México: subsistencia, negociación y pobreza urbana en tiempos de la Revolución”, *Historia Mexicana* 60:21 (October-December, 2010):1077-1118.

stand out from the rest of other itinerant peddlers' cries. In Mexico City's roads, aural advertising was a central component for effective audience targeting.



Figure 2. Crowded market in Mexico City, 1909, *Tulane University Digital Archive*, <https://digitallibrary.tulane.edu/islandora/object/tulane%3A10125>

As David Goodman suggests, in the crowded, urban marketplace, “[r]epetition became one hallmark of systematic intent, aiming to reinforce messages and maximize chances of reaching most of the population [...], effective transmission of propaganda requires attentive hearers as well as a carefully crafted message.”<sup>48</sup> According to Goodman, to avoid the risk of canceling each other out and creating a mere cacophony for passersby who were immersed in a multiplicity of street cries, the phonographic vendor had to choose the right site, repeat a variety of calls multiple times, and lure pedestrians with an excerpt of the

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<sup>48</sup> David Goodman, “Propaganda and sound” in Michael Bull (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies* (London: Routledge, 2018): 90-93.



music that would await them.



Figure 3. Man operating a phonograph on the street, *Mediateca - Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, accessed June 2, 2019, [https://mediateca.inah.gob.mx/islandora\\_74/islandora/object/fotografia%3A451821](https://mediateca.inah.gob.mx/islandora_74/islandora/object/fotografia%3A451821).

Itinerant public criers and amusement announcers adapted the newly developed listening horn to great effect. Daniel Fernandez Pereira, a *pregonero* (town crier) who had obtained a license to advertise commercial houses and shows, used a horn “to call attention at each corner and explaining the announcement in a loud voice, requesting a five-minute permanence at each [location]”.<sup>49</sup> The same promotional method served phonographic operators like the one depicted in the Figure 3, who appears to operate an Edison Standard Phonograph carefully installed on an improvised wooden stall. The petty exhibitors used the listening horn to amplify selected pieces of music. The apparatus was also equipped with

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<sup>49</sup> Mario Barbosa Cruz, *El Trabajo En Las Calles: Subsistencia y Negociación Política En La Ciudad de México a Comienzos Del Siglo XX* (México: Colegio de México/Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Cuajimalpa, 2008):103.

several pairs of ear tubes available for those who, after paying the one cent fee, could enjoy a two- or four-minute personal audition.

The city's streets echoed with the sounds of the voices of street peddlers, families, young children, and gendarmes — an aural tapestry that spoke of reciprocal exchanges and mutual support networks as well as conflict. In 1906, policemen arrested the owners of a phonograph located in the Plaza Martinez de la Torre, Florentina Castillo and Juan Hernandez, after the two had engaged in a physical dispute with a careless patron, Juan Mendez. In the scuffle, the popular cylinder “El Huerfano” had been damaged. After the police took the aggressors to the Carcel de Belem (the local prison), a child was left behind to guard and operate the family's phonograph.<sup>50</sup>

Families and children were actively involved in the demonstration, advertising, and distribution of local music cylinders. This not only demonstrates the access that the city's urban poor possessed to the sound reproducing technology, but also reveals how the talking machine had been adapted to social and economic practices already in use. Indeed, as historians focused on the study of the urban poor in nineteenth-century Mexico City have argued, working-class *Capitalinos* were actively involved in the creation of community. Their mutual support networks allowed them to assert their public presence in the city and, at times, subvert the elite's control.<sup>51</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, the increasing presence of phonographs on the streets of middle- and lower-class neighborhoods prompted an explosion of regulatory

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<sup>50</sup> “En un Fonógrafo”. *El País* (Mexico, 23rd October 1906): 3.

<sup>51</sup> For a thorough analysis, see the Introduction of this text.

Christina M. Jiménez, “Performing Their Right to the City”; John Lear. *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens*; Mario Barbosa Cruz, *El Trabajo En Las Calles*; Andrew Konove, *Black Market Capital. Urban Politics and the Shadow Economy in Mexico City* (University of California Press, 2018); Robert M. Buffington, *A Sentimental Education for the Working Man: The Mexico City Penny Press, 1900-1910* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2015).



measures. By then, the city's cultured elites had come to perceive street vendors as a clear obstacle to attaining the long-awaited modernity; their local retail system hindered the sale of imported manufactured goods available in department stores and impeded the capitalist taxation system. Accordingly, technocratic advisors implemented legal regulations aimed at reforming the metropolitan poor — and the public spaces they inhabited — through policing and education. The networks of solidarity among the working class were represented as malfeasance and the phonographic exhibitors portrayed as defalcators who took advantage of the naiveté of their patrons.

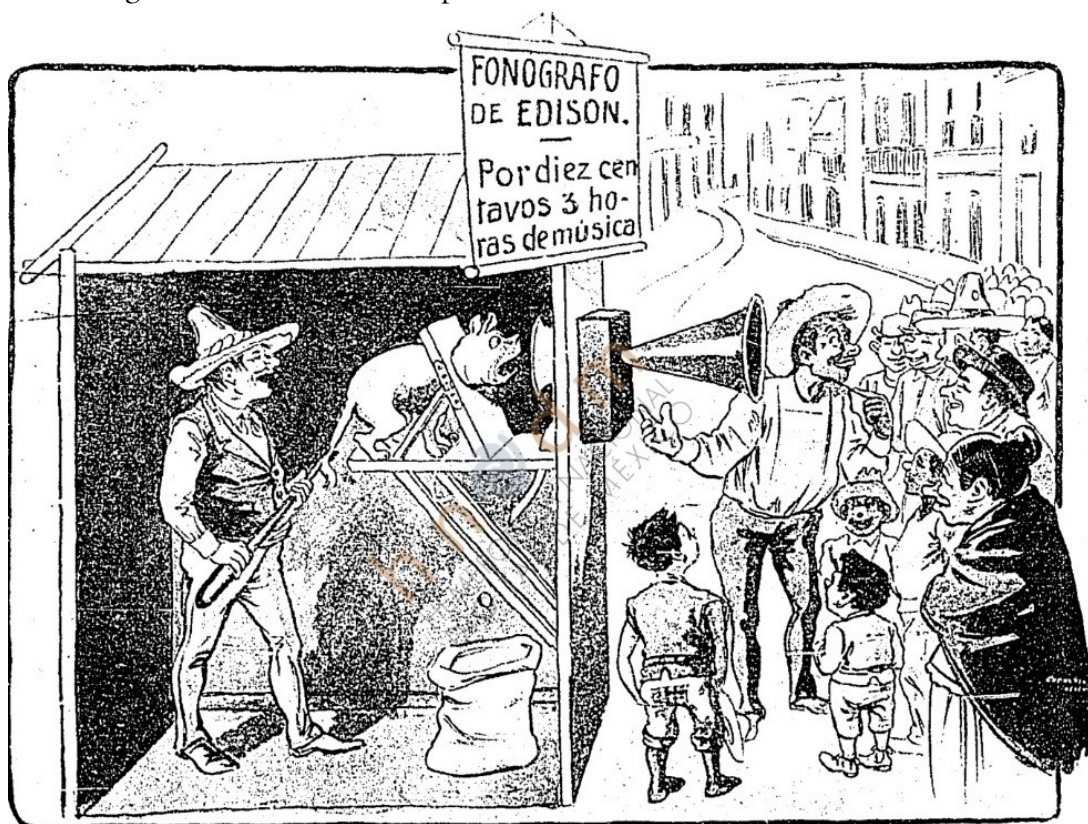


Figure 4. Editorial caricature, *El Seminario Literario Ilustrado* (Mexico, 8th July 1903): 23.

A caricature published in 1901 in *El Comico* illustrates the stereotypical street petty entrepreneur advertising the “Edison’s Phonograph. For 10 cents 3 hours of music.” As the caption reads: “In this phonograph you can hear the most amazing things. You will hear a dog barking and squealing as if its tail were being gripped with a pair of tongs”. While the

caravan of spectators waits for its turn to hear the technological marvel, the visual chronicle reveals the truth: a real canine is being tortured to produce those amazing sounds the crowd expects.<sup>52</sup>

Embedded in this narrative of the alien naïf easily fooled by the mimetic representation of reality — as Lisa Gitelman suggests — was the notion that culture was reserved only for those who “have it and get it”.<sup>53</sup> This assumption was central to the modernizing discourse embedded in Porfirian policy initiatives and social reforms which stressed the need to avoid the mingling of different social and ethnic groups. The restrictions targeted the elimination of immoral social practices, the control over a marginal population, as well as the punishment of non-civilized behavior in the public space.

Rather than elaborate on the impact of these policies, I intend to highlight how lower-class aural practices present in elite testimony illustrate the active participation of autonomous urban poor and indigenous groups in the culture of the street. The cartoon described above can be used to show the concurrence of an audience of *pelados*<sup>54</sup>: bare-footed children, women wearing *rebozos*,<sup>55</sup> and a small group of broad-brimmed hat owners who serve to epitomize the bewilderment of city residents encountering the new sound technology. This argument reinforced the views of the Mexican intelligentsia that they must discipline and discriminate between civilized *Capitalino* citizens and those that were considered ignorant of the aural codes, behaviors, and appearances. The contrast is sharply described by the *Mexican Herald*:

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<sup>52</sup> *El Comico*, (Mexico, 09<sup>th</sup> June 1903): 3.

<sup>53</sup> Lisa Gitelman, “Reading Music, Reading Records, Reading Race: Musical Copyright and the U. S. Copyright Act of 1909”, *The Musical Quarterly* 81:2 (summer, 1997): 265-290.

<sup>54</sup> Literally stripped or peeled person. Pejorative term for lower-class people.

<sup>55</sup> At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, middle- and high- class people abandoned the traditional Spanish fashion for the modern imported French garments in vogue. Thus, *enaguas*, *rebozos*, and *sarapes* were pieces of clothing usually associated in this period with indigenous and *mestizo* people.

When real city-bred people will linger delightedly to hear the machine-parrot, what can be expected of the unsophisticated country folk who only leave their pueblos once a year, and that during holy week? They come to the capital with their mind devoutly bent on miracles, and when they strike the *portales*, and the voice of the “machina parlante” reaches their ears, singing “The Lost Chord” in a high falsetto, they think they have encountered a new one. The varied expressions on the faces of the crowd that listens for the first time, are a study, running the gamut from looks of profound awe to a delighted grin.<sup>56</sup>

As the critique shows, the interaction of *los pelados* with modern audio technology defied traditional perceptions of hierarchy in nineteenth-century Mexico. Even though the “machine-parrot” fulfilled the function of entertainment to everyone in the streets, the writer observes a difference between those “unsophisticated country folk” and the “real city-bred people”, laying the groundwork for the formulation of measures centered on undermining the agency of the capital’s impoverished sectors. Such was the case of the legal initiative discussed during the spring of 1895, when the increasing demand for phonographic exhibitor’s licenses provoked strong reactions from the public opinion.

Petitioners pleaded with local authorities to enforce existing regulations to contain the spread of contagious illnesses among the urban population. A newspaper article published during this period in *El Universal* described how difficult it was to ignore the crowd that gathered in the streets around the *fonógrafos ambulantes* (street phonographs), since the reduction in the price of this invention —previously inaccessible to the poor— allowed the working class to pay the cost of this amusement.

The multitude gathers around them [—continues the chronicle—] but as this may present a danger to health, we believe it is in the duty of the Board of Health —and to it we especially address ourselves— to dictate such measures as it may think proper to avert this danger.[...]Two or three days ago, we consigned the fact, without entering

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<sup>56</sup> “Maquina Parlante”. *The Mexican Herald* (Mexico, 25<sup>th</sup> March 1902): 2.

into appreciations that a person complained of having begun to feel pains in the ears, consecutive to several auditions on the phonograph.[...] [In the event that] a healthy man applies the tube immediately after the sick person, it is possible that he will contract the same affection, if this is contagious, as we do believe that no hygienic care is taken with such apparatuses, the possibility of contagion we believe is well demonstrated.<sup>57</sup>

The Superior Board of Health and the local government responded quickly to the complaint as the request was accordant with the Sanitary Code of 1891. As a result, on 16 April 1895 the Mexico City council issued a decree authorizing police officers to verify that street phonographic exhibitors were carrying a four per cent boric acid solution to daily disinfect the ear tubes of the sound machine.<sup>58</sup>

Since the beginning of that decade, public health experts and social reformers had stressed the importance of raising awareness of the poor sanitary habits of the lower classes and to provide effective instruction on how to prevent the propagation of transmissible diseases. These sanitary campaigns became intertwined with the elite's paternalistic assumptions that only once the poor had complied with the basic rules of hygiene could they be allowed to inhabit the city's public spaces.<sup>59</sup> Rather than demonstrating the efficacy of these measures, Mexico City's elite were consumed with their anxiety over the social mingling of different ethnicities, races, and social groups in urban public spaces and decried the threat of contagion constituted by the phonograph's ear tubes. This exclusionary discourse helps us understand how pivotal the bodily component of sound technology had become as system of cultural exchange.

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<sup>57</sup> "El fonógrafo como vehículo de contagio", *El Universal*, (Mexico, 4th april 1895): 1. [translation by author]

<sup>58</sup> AHDF, Policía en General, Book 3639, File 1103.

<sup>59</sup> Claudia Agostoni, *Monuments of Progress: Modernization and Public Health in Mexico City, 1876-1910*, Latin American and Caribbean Series 4 (Calgary, Alta: University of Calgary Press, 2003); Claudia Agostoni, "Popular Health Education and Propaganda in Times of Peace and War in Mexico City, 1890s-1920s," *American Journal of Public Health* 96:1 (January 2006): 52-61.

## CONCLUSION

In just under thirty years, the circulation of the talking machine in Mexico City prompted numerous theories about the value of adopting sonic mechanical appliances into the urban lifestyle. The marketing of this medium in the country was surrounded with uncertainty. The first exhibitors advertised its potential usability as a dictation device for business rather than an object of entertainment, emphasizing the profitability as well as cost and time reduction in the creation of voice messages. American businessmen flowing into the country embraced the use of the device in commerce, while binational agreements sought to further the exportation of manufactured goods across the border. Since its creation, the phonograph embodied emerging principles of capitalism, modernity, and progress. Social and political reformers in Mexico highlighted the relevance of embracing Edison's inventions to transform the capital into a cosmopolitan metropolis.

As I posit in the present work, it is in these preliminary protocols surrounding the first decades of the talking machine that we can glimpse contemporary power relations in nineteenth-century Mexico City. Although the tinfoil phonograph failed to deliver on its promise as a business device, its reception in Mexico illuminated musical codes linked to long-running political discussions and surviving divisions of an Ancien Régime society. Starting in 1880s, political and economic reforms accelerated the country's industrialization and eroded established social hierarchies.

This process was coalescent with structural measures that affected the spatial dynamics of the urban layout. Members of the upper classes became familiar with the new culture of consumption on display in novel departmental stores that had been established in the heart of the capital. Favored by President Porfirio Diaz entrepreneurial projects, Mexico City's

residential neighborhoods at the city's centre were refashioned into a robust financial district reserved for the sale of exclusive goods among which was Edison's improved phonograph.

The quest of American phonographic companies to increase their profits abroad allowed for the sale of talking machines among the impoverished sectors of the city. These sectors relied on social networks to distribute and display local music records. For them, the informal economy and petty entrepreneurship could be reconciled with the growing commercialization of the public space. Propelling the commodification of sound technology in Mexico, this trend contrasted with elite measures that sought to segregate different social and ethnic groups. Subsequently, the streets became a contested terrain of contradictory views of modernity. As the Porfirian regime stressed the importance to eliminate "non-civilized" behavior and "immoral" social practices from public spaces, street vendors engaged in the creation of a market for the phonographic device for musical entertainment purposes.

CHAPTER TWO:  
DEALERS, RECORDING PIONEERS, AND AURAL TRADITIONS: THE  
NASCENT PHONOGRAPHIC MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT IN MEXICO  
(1900-1913)

US Navy Lieutenant A. R. Phillips Jr. was fascinated by the discovery of a small collection of well-preserved brown cylinders he found in an antique store in Mexico City in 1945 while on a thirty-day leave from active duty. He closely examined the assortment of boxes, selecting only those that were labelled. As he would later recall, he bought several dozen records, most of which were contained in Bettini-labelled boxes. He chose “a number of ‘Hugens y Acosta, Madrid’ cylinders in tin containers lithographed in brilliant colors; ‘Sociedad Fonografica Espanola’ cylinders in dark blue cardboard containers; two cylinders in boxes with the printed label, ‘J. Morales Cortazar y Cia., Mexico’, several in an early Edison box, and a number in the perfectly plain gray cardboard box used from the earliest times”.<sup>1</sup> The Phillips collection was the only authenticated set of Bettini wax cylinders known to exist at the end of the Second World War. Yet, what is most significant for the present work, was the presence of small labels still glued to each of the phonogram boxes that read:

J. Morales Cortazar y Cia.  
1ª del 5 de mayo No. 6 Apartado Postal No. 968. MEXICO.  
In its field it is the house that sells the cheapest.  
Ask for the catalog which is sent free of charge.<sup>2</sup>

This company, located in Mexico, not only imported phonograms from the United States and Spain, but also recorded in Mexico City under its own label, identifying its

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<sup>1</sup> A. R. Phillips, Jr. “Bettini Cylinders from Mexico”, *The Hillandale News* 69 (October 1972): 197-198.

<sup>2</sup> En su ramo es la casa que vende más barato. Pidan el Catálogo que se remite gratis. [translation by author]

products with a stamp imprinted on the cardboard boxes and a spoken announcement introducing the musical content. Newspaper sources suggest that J. Morales Cortazar was active as early as 1899 working as an authorized distributor of Edison's phonographs in Mexico. This business, which during the initial stage of the phonographic industry had operated as a small-scale supplier, developed a recording label to provide local music that could be played on phonographs, graphophones, and gramophones. Just three years later, the 1903 *General Directory of the Mexican Republic* referred to J. Morales Cortazar y Cia, along with Espinosa y Alcalde and Jesus Gonzalez Medina, as one of the three main distributors of talking machines in the country.<sup>3</sup> The incursion and diversification of Mexican entrepreneurs into the manufacture of records forced established American phonographic companies to consolidate foreign branches and create a sales office exclusively for the Latin American market.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the talking-machine industry in the United States abandoned its business model that had previously granted rights to regional exhibitors within a protected territory and established connections with local franchises. In its place, the rival multinational companies known as the Big Three —Edison's National Phonograph Co., the Columbia Phonograph Co., and the Victor Talking Machine Co.— consolidated their position in recorded sound production through the development of a standardized system for the manufacturing of devices. In the first half of the twentieth century, the major phonographic corporations reshaped the global soundscape by creating a complex international supply network. The head office centralized the manufacturing, assembly, and distribution of the phonographic apparatus, while the record agency was in charge of supervising the inventory and controlling the quality of the sonic material.

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<sup>3</sup> *Directorio General de la República Mexicana* (Mexico City: Ruhland & Alhschier, 1903): 482.



This chapter turns to the emergence of a distinctive Mexican aural modernity. It covers thirteen eventful years, beginning in 1900 with the consolidation of a multinational phonographic industry in Mexico and ending in 1913, when the revolutionary forces invaded the city. Between 1899 and 1903, a burgeoning network of Mexico City recording artists, merchants, and exhibitors marked the start of a locally-constituted, urban, music-making industry whose participants were steeped in the long-standing cultural and aural traditions of the metropolis's inhabitants. The suppliers of counterfeit phonograms were able to compete with American phonographic companies by manufacturing Mexican popular songs and zarzuelas. In order to win the loyalty of Spanish-speaking customers in the United States and Mexico, the "Big Three" expanded their musical inventory and, tentatively so, began to tailor their catalogue to local listening practices. When confronted with local musical practices and aural traditions, the National Phonograph Company, the Columbia Phonograph Company, and the Victor Talking Machine Company began to rethink their standards of musical uniformity, which, in turn, gave rise to an aural modernity emanating from the autonomy of the local Mexican markets.

#### MERCHANTS, DEALERS, AND JOBBERS: PHONOGRAPHIC NETWORKS IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEXICO

By 1902, the company of J. Morales y Cortazar had achieved widespread diffusion of its products through a planned commercial strategy that involved a weekly presence in print media and the sponsorship of public raffles. Subscribers to the city's principal newspapers could bet on a ticket to win a ready-to-use street phonograph, acquire illustrated catalogues, or be informed of the arrival of each assortment of new phonographs and graphophones from either Edison or Columbia. The published advertisements of this company between

1899 and 1903 revealed the development of a local recording laboratory where blank cylinders were distributed next to “folk songs and jocose recitations” of the comedian Manuel M. Martinez and the baritone Ramon Blanchard. Even the cylinders acquired from original distributors were marked with Morales y Cortazar’s logo and “with the Morales announcements added to (or recorded over) a shaved rim”.<sup>4</sup>

Record manufacture was not an exclusive operation of Morales y Cortazar, as other local retailers such as Joaquin Espinosa and Jorge A. Alcalde sought to reach new audiences by signing contracts with well-known musicians. The commercial association between Espinosa and Alcalde that lasted from 1899 to 1902 held recording rights of the popular Rosales y Murillo duet as a flagship product. When the company was dissolved on August 23rd, Joaquin Espinosa Co. assumed exclusive rights over the phonograms of the duet, which became some of the best-known and beloved recordings of the company. Musical compositions of Julio Ayala and “Los Reservistas” were advertised in the working-class penny press, next to a note detailing the closest local retailer’s location. The editor of the penny press *La Guacamaya* attributed the music and lyrics of “Los Reservistas. Paso Doble” to Rosales y Murillo, from the phonographic establishment of Joaquin Espinosa, and commented “that all the ambulant phonographers are exploiting this piece with magnificent results”.<sup>5</sup>

During this time, a growing number of phonographic street exhibitors in Mexico City took advantage of new accessories and better equipment to attract more clients. A workshop located in Santo Domingo no. 12, a modest establishment adapted to handle

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<sup>4</sup> William Shaman, William J. Collins and Calvin M. Goodwin, *More EJS: Discography of the Edward J. Smith Recordings* (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1999): 243.

<sup>5</sup> Robert M. Buffington, *A Sentimental Education for the Working Man: The Mexico City Penny Press, 1900-1910* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015): 247.

metal smelting works, produced a hand-wrought iron structure that allowed street vendors to carry talking machine accessories in a safe and easy manner.

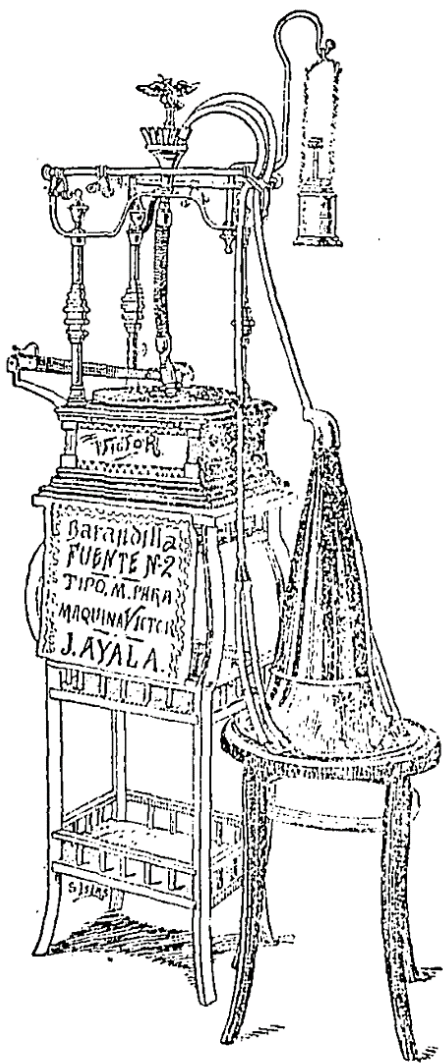


Figure 4. Detail of an advertisement for Julio Ayala's workshop, *El Seminario Literario Ilustrado* (Mexico, 8th July 1903): 23.

As illustrated above, “the unrivaled railing ‘Fuente’” adaptable to any phonograph ‘Victor’, demonstrates the customization of an extendable tube with a Porfirian eagle’s

insignia on the top, which allowed for the installation of several pairs of listening tubes and the characteristic phonographic horn.<sup>6</sup>

The inventiveness of this workshop was embodied in its owner, Julio Ayala, who, together with his orchestra, manufactured *in-situ* humoristic and religious records. In November 1902, the newspaper *El Tiempo Ilustrado* circulated a photograph showing the interior of Julio Ayala's atelier.

**Toda persona que tenga Fonografo,**



Se le recomienda pasen á la Cerca de Sto. Domingo núm 12 Taller mecánico para aparatos eléctricos y científicos á comprar los fonogramas más acreditados de episodios históricos nacionales y de actualidad por Julio Ayala.

Recuerdos de la Intervención Francesa en tres partes.

1.<sup>o</sup> Salida de las tropas francesas de la capital de la República. 2.<sup>o</sup> Prisión de Maximiliano en el Convento de Capuchinas (Querétaro) 3.<sup>o</sup> Exiliamiento de Maximiliano, Mejía y Miramón en el Cerro de las Campanas. Piezas de cantos populares, de música y religiosas.

Interior de los talleres donde se fabrica la barandilla fuerte y se graban fonogramas.  
**PIDAN CATALOGOS.**

Figure 5. Advertisement portraying Julio Ayala's workshop, *El Tiempo Ilustrado* (Mexico, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1902): 16.

The image provides an intimate peek into the recording lab, showing the devices and instruments used and revealing their most famous work to date: a collection of phonograms dramatizing various episodes of Mexican political and military events of the past

<sup>6</sup> *El Seminario Literario Ilustrado* (Mexico, 8th July 1903): 23.

forty years.<sup>7</sup> The advertisement stated that the historical narrations were “of great interest, especially for schools, because they provide the students with patriotic instruction, delighting them and not tiring their imagination”.<sup>8</sup> More likely, however, these dramatizations were carried into the public spaces of Mexico City by street phonographers who were attuned to the musical needs of the audience and the growing patriotic sensibility of the middle- and working-class sectors.<sup>9</sup>

The accessibility of locally-manufactured records featuring celebrated comedians and musicians incentivized suppliers to implement new marketing approaches aimed at working-class customers. Some of the strategies included offering discounts of ten to twenty per cent during holidays, advertising promotional packages priced as low as fifteen pesos, and making basic Edison models available for as little as ten pesos. Similarly, in 1904, the company of Jorge A. Alcalde offered a wide assortment of phonographs, graphophones, gramophones, and zonophones ranging from 10 to 200 pesos, encouraging patrons to “record your *Congrats* in a cylinder, and along with an Edison phonograph, send it to Lupe.” Another version of this advertisement reads: “with only ten pesos you can gift your little friends Concha and Lupe with a magnificent phonograph that reproduce everything with great perfection” (“Concha” and “Lupe” were the most popular female names among the Mexican middle class during the Porfiriato).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> An example of this historical episode can be found in *DAHR*, s.v. “Columbia matrix 5564. Recuerdos de la intervención francesa / Julio Ayala,” accessed September 2, 2021, [https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/2000044129/5564-Recuerdos\_de\_la\_intervencion\_francesa].

<sup>8</sup> *El Tiempo Ilustrado* (Mexico, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1902): 16.

<sup>9</sup> According to Maria Elena Diaz, during the last decade of the Porfirian period, the popular weeklies evidenced a flourishing political militancy among all waged workers— who defined themselves as *el pueblo* (the populace). This politicization of popular culture was impregnated with historical symbolisms of indigenous resistance and struggle for liberation from foreign oppression. Maria Elena Diaz, “The Satiric Penny Press for Workers in Mexico, 1900-1910: A Case Study in the Politicisation of Popular Culture,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 22:3 (1990): 497–526.

<sup>10</sup> *El Imparcial* (Mexico, 12th December 1904): 4.

In Mexico, regional suppliers tried to price their merchandise competitively, offering a diversity of phonographic models ranging in aesthetic and price. This stoked consumer demand from a now captivated Mexican middle and upper class. Concurrently, that same extensive supply stream drove rival companies to expand into new international markets.

As other scholars have indicated, the nascent market of media entertainment in the world was linked not only to the circulation of coin-slot machines after the 1890s, but also to the need of the Big Three to co-opt small, local recording workshops in the production and dissemination of their products.<sup>11</sup> To engage in international trade, the main recording sound corporations in the United States undertook a major reconfiguration of the phonographic industry that focused on three different spheres. First, they sought to standardize the mechanical equipment and make the technology transferable among different countries. Second, they aimed to refine the record duplication processes and the establishment of an assembly line in each of the record pressing factories. Finally, they invested in the development of phonographic products for home entertainment as well as an extensive marketing campaign. As a result, as Sergio Ospina suggests, the internationalization of the phonographic industry entailed a “continuous redesign of the material products (phonographs and records), and a constant adaptation of commercial models, marketing strategies, and musical contents”.<sup>12</sup>

In the domestic space of bourgeois families in the United States and Mexico, musical education and entertainment acquired a new meaning following the introduction of phonographic cabinets that combined both functionality and aesthetic appeal. The talking

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<sup>11</sup> David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009); Sergio Daniel Ospina Romero, “Recording Studios on Tour: The expeditions of the Victor Talking Machine Company Through Latin America, 1903-1926”, PhD dissertation (Cornell University, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Sergio Daniel Ospina Romero. “Recording Studios on Tour”: 4

machine reshaped social practices around domestic musical entertainment in the wake of an impressive advertising campaign that had promoted the crucial role of recorded music in enriching musical culture at home.<sup>13</sup> The business expansion of the Big Three and their targeting of worldwide consumers could not have been achieved without a commitment to tailoring their products to local musical tastes. Such was the case of the 1901 Gramophone Company Report which emphasized that:

While the technology of the industry and products such as gramophones were internationally transferable, the material contained on records had to be very country-specific. One of the initial discoveries of the Gramophone Company had been that American artists were not always a success with British audiences. Similarly, the Belgian branch, which had been supplied with records from the French catalog, complained that ‘in comic records, the Belgians, whose French is spoken much slower than in Paris, cannot follow the same Parisian pattern, unless it is spoken very deliberately’.<sup>14</sup>

This was the central motive that led members of The Big Three’s Foreign Branches to contact leading representatives —and former franchisees— of Edison, Columbia, and Victor in Mexico City. With this move, the brief interlude between 1890 and 1903 that had witnessed the creation of independent local companies whose musical content responded to domestic aural networks was coming to an end. The companies of Joaquin Espinosa, Jorge A. Alcalde, and J. Morales Cortazar were incorporated into the structure of wholesalers and

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<sup>13</sup> Kyle S. Barnett, “Furniture Music: The Phonograph as Furniture, 1900–1930,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 18:3 (2006): 301–324; Nathan David Bowers, “Creating a Home Culture for the Phonograph: Women and the Rise of Sound Recordings in the United States, 1877–1913,” PhD Dissertation, (University of Pittsburgh, 2007); Timothy D Taylor, “The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of ‘Mechanical Music,’” *Ethnomusicology* 51:2 (Spring/Summer, 2017): 281–305.

<sup>14</sup> Report on All Branches, Jan. 1909, EMI, cited in Geoffrey Jones, “The Gramophone Company: An Anglo-American Multinational, 1898–1931,” *Business History Review* 59, no. 1 (ed 1985): 84.

legally bound by means of a contract, while the multinational phonographic companies attempted to gain control over the entirety of production.<sup>15</sup>

## INDIGENOUS AURAL IDENTITY AND THE RECORDING STUDIOS IN THE EARLY COMMERCIAL MUSIC INDUSTRY

The first two decades of the twentieth century set the tone for an increasingly global demand for foreign and popular musical repertoire. In the case of the Americas, phonographic companies concentrated their efforts primarily on recording immigrant performers in the United States.<sup>16</sup> In 1903, Mexico became the first foreign nation to host a series of expeditions intended to recruit Spanish- and English-speaking commissioners and legal intermediaries, as well as to record local performers. To do so, small groups of technicians with recording laboratory experience were deployed to Mexico City from each of the major multinational phonographic companies between 1903 and 1907.<sup>17</sup>

In the case of Victor Talking Machine, once Turkish immigrant Jose Vidal Schmill took over the management of the Mexican sales branch in 1902, the business embarked on a quest to find well-known talent and expand their catalog. Now under the name of *Maquina Parlante Victor*—using Nipper the dog as its recognizable trademark—it produced

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<sup>15</sup> A. J. Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound*, (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> William H. Kenney states that around 1900 the nascent music entertainment industry slowly became aware of the profitability of foreign records since 25 million immigrants, mainly from Eastern and Southern Europe, entered United States in the period from 1865 to 1917. According to him, “in 1900, 13.5 percent of the population of the United States was foreign born, and during the next thirty years 3.5 million Italians, 2 million Russians, including many of Jewish origins, 2.5 million from Austria and Hungary, and nearly 1 million Germans migrated to the United States. In 1910, 700 foreign-language daily newspapers with a combined circulation of 5 million catered to immigrant readers. The record companies estimated that non-native speakers of English amounted to about one-third of the total market for phonograph products. American companies were to issue at least 30,000 different 78 rpm records aimed at foreign-born communities between 1900 and 1950”. See, William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 67.

<sup>17</sup> Sergio Daniel Ospina Romero. “Recording Studios on Tour”, 90.



numerous matrix discs in the midst of recording excursions to Mexico City in 1903 and again in July 1905. Sound technician William H. Nafety was in charge of finding musicians and establishing relationships with translators, music shops and schools, phonographic dealers, and street vendors. Although most of the details of the journey succumbed to a fire at Victor's record plant in Camden in 1904, it is possible to piece together the live musical scenery in popular theaters (carpas shows) and highbrow stages where musicians like Jose Torres Ovando, Braulio Rosete, Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Sappers Battalion Military Band, and the vocal duet of Jesus Abrego and Leopoldo Picazo performed. (Their names are listed in the first editions of Victor discs recorded in Mexico.)<sup>18</sup>

Following this expedition, the Columbia Gramophone Company—eager to record artists that could compete with those listed in Victor's catalog—sent the American electrician Charles W. Carson to Mexico City to find exceptional musical talent to produce 250-disc masters and 250-cylinder masters portraying Spanish-speaking performers and storytellers. From January 28 to April 2, 1904, Carson along with the sound technician H. L. Marker established connections with the phonographic agency of Joaquin Espinosa to install a record laboratory and manufacturing plant. This granted them access to musicians with previous recording experience such as the Rosales and Murillo duet and the renowned singers of the Principal Theater as well as orchestral ensembles such as the Iturbide Orchestra and the Regimiento de Artilleria military band under the baton of Estanislao Mejia.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Natalia Bieletto, "The Poor and the Modern City: Recognition and Misrecognition of the Carpas Shows in Mexico City (1890-1930)," *Mester* 43:1 (2014): 79-98; Sergio Daniel Ospina Romero. *Recording Studios on Tour*. For more information and access to digital reproduction of the matrix, consult the Series Matrix, Sub Series Mexico field trip 1905 in the *DAHR*, [<https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php>].

<sup>19</sup> Library of Congress, Recorded Sound Section, Tim Walsh Paper-Scrapbook Box 17; "Henry/Harry Louis Marker" and "Charles Wesley Carson", *Recording Pioneers*, accessed September 2, 2021, [[http://www.recordingpioneers.com/rs\\_indexV.html](http://www.recordingpioneers.com/rs_indexV.html)]

The end of Carson's trip to Mexico coincided with the appointment of Rafael Cabañas as representative for Edison Phonograph Company and the forging of an alliance between this multinational business and Jorge Alcalde and J. Morales y Cortazar, both leading talking machine distributors in the city. A letter from the Edison Phonograph's commissioner Cabañas to the Foreign Branch dated on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1905 provided a detailed description of the phonograph business conditions in Mexico:

Our principal competitors in Mexico are the Victor Talking Machine and the Columbia Graphophone. The Victor has been pushed actively by the General Agent, J. V. Schmill, for about three years. He advertises extensively and has dealers in all of the largest cities. A very good business has been established, especially with the higher classes, who, owing to the fine opera selections they list have begun to show a marked preference for the Victor over other machines. The Victor people list about fifty Mexican selections of 150 taken by them, most of the masters having been lost in the recent fire at their factory. This machine is very surely working its way into the best homes.

The Columbia people are represented by Mr. Joaquin Espinosa, who was given the General Agency in Mexico the latter part of 1903. He has a very competent Manager at the head of the business, a Mr. Wilkinson [...]. They are advertising extensively and are pushing the business aggressively throughout the country, keeping men constantly on the road and going even to the extent of placing goods in consignment when found necessary to do so to get a Dealer started. They list at present about 250 Mexican selections in both disc and cylinder Records, and although these are extremely poor, they are selling well owing to the fact that there has been nothing else for the people to choose from.<sup>20</sup>

Aware of the incursion of rival phonograph companies into the neighboring country, the Edison Company, which already had an extensive repertoire of Spanish-speaking songs recorded in their headquarters, used a different strategy to excel in the crowded music

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<sup>20</sup> "Letter from Rafael Cabanas to Walter Stevens, January 23rd, 1905," *Edison Papers Digital Edition*, accessed January 18, 2020, <http://edison.rutgers.edu/digital/document/CL212AAD>.

market. In June 1904 the *Edison Phonograph Monthly* announced the founding of Mexican National Phonograph Company, a subsidiary of Edison, and the installation of a record plant.<sup>21</sup>

The endeavors of the three main sound-recording companies to open their own manufacturing facilities in the Mexican capital can be explained with the implementation of the electroplate system, a method to accelerate the production of matrices from a single master record. The manufacture of a metal reverse or negative copies via electroplate reduced inventory costs while foreign brand technicians could easily assess local musical taste and recruit artists aligned with companies' products and reputation.<sup>22</sup> After settling in Mexico, Victor, Columbia, and Edison cultivated a niche of customers loyal to their music label through a careful selection of repertoire. The focus of advertising campaigns shifted from technological advancements to the art of vernacular performance even though quality control was still outsourced to factories in Camden and New York.<sup>23</sup> This growing network of foreign factories propelled not only the creation of distinctive trademarks but also the worldwide expansion of well-established notions of Western superiority and embedded American consumerist practices. It is clear that fostering relations with Mexican recording technicians was a fundamental stage in the establishment of subsidiaries.

Traditional interpretations of the early commercial music industry have focused solely on the adoption of sonic technology by Latin American audiences as a unilateral

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<sup>21</sup> "Installing a Record Plant in Mexico", *The Edison Phonograph Monthly*, 2:4 (June 1904): 4.

<sup>22</sup> In the first decades of the twentieth century, the marketing competition in the sound-recorded business prompted a differentiated response from each one of the big three. As Suisman states, Victor Company offered consumers "the world's leading musical artists" as an influential trademark, epitomizing the superior quality of the company's products and the benefits of phonographs as both entertaining and educational tools. Like Victor, Columbia's music label promoted a high-class advertising scheme, valuing Western-like technical and artistic standards in their recorded performers. In contrast, Edison remained focus almost exclusively on the outstanding sound quality of his products. See, David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> A. J. Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound*, 62.

process. The present study calls into question this seemingly linear process of appropriation and adaptation of American phonographic products, offering insights into the engagement of regional pioneering companies like Espinosa, Alcalde, Morales & Cortazar. In this sense, the sources that describe the incursion of early audio technicians into Mexico serve to illustrate the complex web of connections between multinational companies and local businessmen and the multiple aural identities at play during the process of music production.

From 1902 to 1910, the traveling scouts dispatched more than 600 records of Mexican popular songs and spoken word pieces for quality control to the headquarters in the United States. In each expedition, the sound engineers were expected to recruit performers whose music could be captured in the two or three minutes allocated to each recording. Sound engineers adjusted the length of songs to the duration of each master record by modifying the tempo or cutting whenever it was deemed necessary. With the help of a portable spring-motor gramophone as well as “several flat wax masters, recording horns of various sizes and shapes, sound boxes, spring motors, and dynamos”, the specialists tried to enhance the reproduction using the available technology.<sup>24</sup>

While every location entailed different aural and performative practices, the familiarity of the sound engineers with the basic instrumental formats helped them determine the equipment required and the best arrangement of musicians in the laboratory. As Ospina Romero argues, the recording sessions were spaces of improvisation that allowed for dynamic decisions about sound in the making.<sup>25</sup> These considerations were based on

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<sup>24</sup> Sergio Daniel Ospina Romero. “Recording Studios on Tour”.

<sup>25</sup> As part of the recording tools, the expedition included 6 different sizes of recording horns used depending on the instrumentation: guitar-like instruments, bowed strings instruments, woodwind, flutes, brass instruments, and percussion. Any traditional musical instrument from the region was catalogued to fit accordingly. See, Sergio Daniel Ospina Romero. “Recording Studios on Tour”, 90 and 181.

acoustic assumptions promoted by each record label, and aiming to enhance clarity, projection, or volume while avoiding distorted sound, blasting, and dissonance.

The correspondence maintained between these pioneering musical emissaries and the managers of Foreign Departments from Victor Talking Machine, Edison's National Phonograph, and Columbia Phonograph reveals the conflicts that arose when multinationals' expectations and Mexican aural traditions collided. A clear example of this can be found in the epistolary exchange between Rafael Cabañas and Walter Stevens, Manager of Edison's Foreign Department after remitting eighteen master records obtained by Jorge A. Alcalde from Columbia Mexican Records. According to Cabañas, the material produced by the first artillery Band was considered by the dealers as the best in the country and certain to find a ready market. After listening to the band, he commented that "for making the records the band was trimmed down to thirty instruments. I have as yet been unable to obtain the instrumentation but would state that the band here tend a great deal more to reed and less to brass than in the U. S."<sup>26</sup>

It is important to remember that the musical character of Porfirian military band was rooted in pre-independence musical practices whereas the Catholic chapel ensembles (*capillas de aliento*) composed of *chirimias*—a double-reed woodwind instrument— were integral to the indoctrination of marginalized groups during the colonial period of New Spain. These artistic groups, subsidized and controlled by the Catholic Church, also fostered indigenous and mestizo political identities and became integral for notions of self-governance in these communities.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently, the emerging patriotic societies would

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<sup>26</sup> Letter from Rafael Cabañas to Walter Stevens, March 24th, 1904, UCSB-CAA, accessed January 18, 2020, <https://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/andersen.php>

<sup>27</sup> Sergio Navarrete Pellicer, "Las capillas de música de viento en Oaxaca durante el siglo XIX", *Heterofonía: revista de investigación musical*, 124 (2001): 9-27.

reclaim the *capillas de aliento* in public civic ceremonies and street festivals. Even though European-style military bands would eventually phase out the use of chirimias, the instrument would remain central to mestizo and indigenous music making. The high-pitched screechy sonority of the chirimia was prominently featured in wind bands in both rural and urban contexts.<sup>28</sup>

In fact, it is this slightly different instrumentation, well-appreciated in Mexican urban scenarios, that was at the heart of controversy over local and American aural codes. Such was the case with Iturbide Orchestra, recorded during the Spring of 1904 and discarded for mass production after V. H. Emerson, Superintendent at the Columbia Record Department described it as a “weak quality” product. Following previous complaints about the same matter, Emerson urged the technician C. W. Carson to inquire with the leader of the band as to why the clarinets were so out of tune most of the time. Despite the reaction of other sound engineers “stating that the bands were laughed at and were of no value” or who “went into hysterics [...] about it”, the unanimous response from the band conductor and Joaquin Espinosa was that they both agreed on the high quality of the band.<sup>29</sup>

For Mexican audiences, these sounds were not “inferior” or “unprofessional” but instead, a recognizable interpretative musical element central to notions of community formation and acoustic knowledge. This intersection, rather than a “mere disagreement” about artistic standards, provides hints about the ways the aural expectations of American phonographic entrepreneurs collided with the musical practices of Mexico City’s

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<sup>28</sup> Guy P. C Thomson. “The ceremonial and political role of village bands, 1846-1974” In: William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French, eds., *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*, Latin American Silhouettes (Wilmington, Del: SR Books, 1994): 564-625; Ariadna Acevedo-Rodrigo, “Playing the Tune of Citizenship: Indian Brass Bands in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Mexico, 1876-1911,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 27:2 (2008): 255-272; Charles V. Heath, *The Inevitable Bandstand: The State Band of Oaxaca and the Politics of Sound* (University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Library of Congress, Recorded Sound Section, Tim Walsh Paper-Scrapbook Box 17

inhabitants. As acoustic engineers and local advisors tried to negotiate the taste and practices of the Spanish-speaking audiences, the Columbia executives' decision about what music should be distributed was based on embedded colonial structures that privileged Western harmonies, timbres, and aesthetic languages. Even though the acceptance of the music in regional markets was central for the profitability of the business, this conflict illustrates the pressure to homogenize musical products in a process that was contingent upon the experts' technical capabilities and a reconfiguration of just how local music should sound.

#### COMMODIFICATION AND POPULAR CREDIT PRACTICES IN MEXICAN AURAL MODERNITY

Having collected a vast number of new materials in repeated recording trips, the global talking machine industry began to expand its large-scale manufacturing capacity and the distribution of recorded music in the early twentieth century. According to reports for the period of 1905 to 1914, the global shipments of phonographs from New York rose to 283,829 packages equivalent to \$ 8,127,073 (US), with approximately one-third of all exports directed towards Latin America.<sup>30</sup> It is in these years that sound-recording companies bolstered their presence in Mexico, aiming to entice potential customers to buy their products by advertising affordability and superiority of the record's performance as well as attracting audiences with "high-culture" advertising that promoted the world's best opera singers.

With the emergence of mechanical instruments like the pianola and the subsequent appearance of the talking machine during the first quarter of the twentieth century, the

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<sup>30</sup> Harry Liebersohn, *Music and the New Global Culture: From the Great Exhibitions to the Jazz Age*, *Big Issues in Music* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019): 182-183, figures obtained by the author from *The Talking Machine World*.

domestic entertainment of Porfirian middle- and upper-class families became ever more elaborate, even in the privacy of their homes. According to Emily Thompson, “the phonograph provided a greater range of music than a household could traditionally produce; not just piano but band music and instrumental and vocal solos could all be called forth, inexpensively and at a moment’s notice”.<sup>31</sup> This resulted in the transition of a society of producers to a society of consumers, encouraging Mexican families to adopt individualized and enclosed listening practices rather than using musicmaking as a central activity for socialization.<sup>32</sup> Simultaneously, Mexico City’s main phonographic distributors sought to lure those with limited income by offering the opportunity to acquire a horn-type talking machine model or a more expensive cabinet version through a contract-bonded sale with the implementation of lease-to-own arrangements. While the cost of the device ranged between one-and-a-half to almost seven times the average of monthly salaries, most low- and middle- income families relied on the system of store credit to make it from one payday to the next.

The lawsuits filed in the archives of the Superior Court of Justice of the Federal District (TSJDF) present a detailed account of the struggles of phonographic companies to ensure full payment of debt or to force the return of the property, plus the payment of interest. Similarly, they offer insight into the efforts of working-class phonographic users to purchase and maintain the precious machines. These promissory notes reveal the social tensions that played out through these transactions, the reception of early commercial music industry, and the impact on the musical culture in Mexico.

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<sup>31</sup> Emily Thompson, “Machines, Music, and the Quest for Fidelity: Marketing the Edison Phonograph in America, 1877-1925,” *The Musical Quarterly* 79:1 (1995): 140.

<sup>32</sup> Marsha Siefert, “The Audience at Home: Sound Recording and the Marketing Musical Taste in the Early Twentieth Century,” in D. Chuck Whitney and James S. Ettema, eds., *AudienceMaking: Media Audiences as Industrial Process* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1994): 186-214.



For the period of 1902 to 1918, the TSJDF's archives document a number of examples of court cases where the plaintiff—usually a local phonographic retailer— filed complaint for non-compliance with the monthly payment agreement, having to submit proof of contract and the overdue promissory notes to call the defendant to trial [Figure 7].

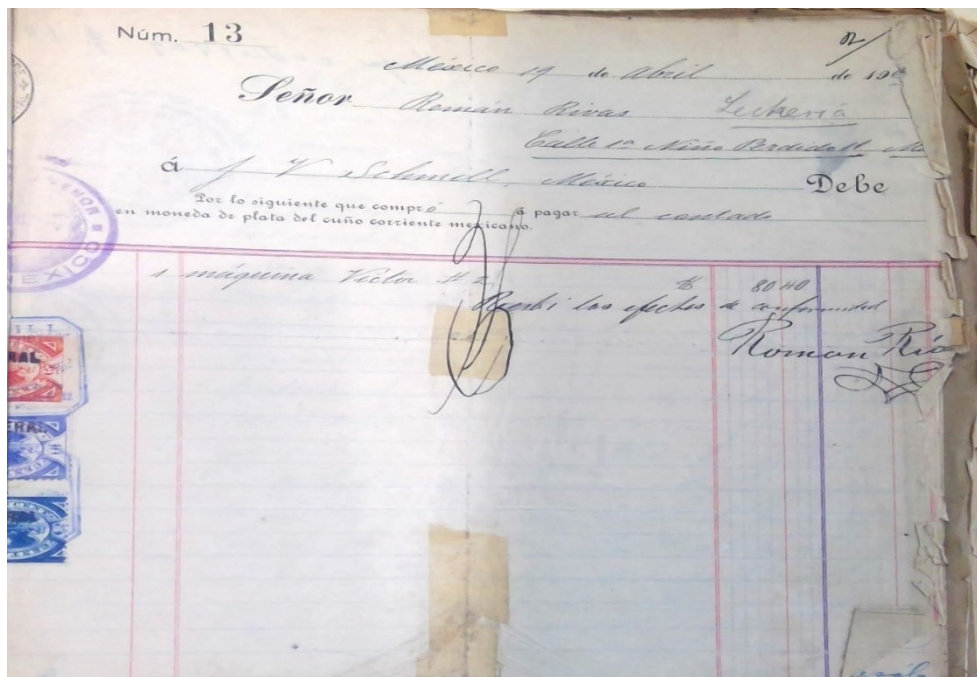


Figure 6. Sample of a promissory note, AGN, *TSJDF Siglo XX*, Box 812.

These legal disputes are especially revealing of the traditional retail protocols in which the seller maintained a network of support and product distribution through a clientele–friendship system. Multinational phonographic companies had a difficult time understanding regional credit practices despite the long-standing Mexican–American economic liaison. As William Schell Jr. explains, the impersonal market relations employed in the more than 300 American-owned businesses established in Mexico City by 1902 could not have been further removed from the world of traditional shops (*tiendas*): “These *tiendas*

carried specialized selections of local goods and often ... they had a club-like atmosphere, and each shopkeeper had his own clientele who patronized him on the basis of friendship.”<sup>33</sup>

In order to reach the profitable sector of low wage earners, the industry had to adopt to customers’ behavior and develop innovative policies to ensure a steady revenue stream. As seen in the image above, the sales prior to 1908 were arranged using informal promissory notes in which the buyer committed himself to pay the purchase price in full within thirty days. The trial records of Victor’s General Agent J. V. Schmill against Roman Rivas for the \$80.40 pesos debt for a *maquina parlante Victor* exemplify the debtor’s strategies. Rivas, a middle-class merchant and owner of a *Lecheria* (dairy product store), stated in his defense that he had sold the sound-reproducing device to Silveria Flores for 100 pesos, with the knowledge that the property still belonged to the company *Maquina Parlante Victor*.<sup>34</sup>

Although the outcome of this case is unknown, it is illustrative of the tactics of evasion used by buyers of goods on credit. After 1909 the Big Three implemented the use of contracts for installment sales. In this case, the Code of Civil Procedures of Mexico City endorsed a legal agreement whereby a phonograph and several records were loaned as a *commodatum* to the client, who would agree to pay the total cost of the device in monthly installments. After the debt had been settled, the ownership of the device and records was transferred to the customer and only then could the bailee relocate the machine from the address designated in the contract.

Once again, the court’s legal files provide evidence of the outcome of the lease-to-own agreement: defaulters did not respond to court summons, changed their address without notifying the merchant, sold or subleased the newly purchased equipment, or

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<sup>33</sup> William Schell, *Integral Outsiders: The American Colony in Mexico City, 1876-1911* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001): 22.

<sup>34</sup> AGN, TSJDF Siglo XX, Box 812.

moved without paying their liabilities. In cases where the person responded to the petition of trial, the judicial process could be extended for thirteen months without reaching a final resolution and with no guarantee that the interest fee or the cost of the product would be recovered.

Contrary to the assumption that users of credit belonged to lower- or working-class households, the statements given in the Mexico City court demonstrate the presence of small business owners, members of the military, and government employees. More significantly, even dealers could be subject to prosecution for overdue payments as illustrated in the case of the *Compania Distribuidora Fonografica Victor* against Jesus Santoscoy Gonzalez for the amount of 233.15 pesos, for merchandise added to his account over the course of three months between June and August of 1913.<sup>35</sup>

An analysis of invoices provided during the trial suggests that Jesus Santoscoy well understood the musical tastes of his Mexican patrons. The records he purchased (and subsequently lent to his clients) illustrate how musical airs circulated within the global phonographic industry. Mexico City's higher classes had a marked preference for Victor's fine opera selections that were frequently advertised in the Mexican periodicals under the name of Red Seal. These high-priced albums featured operatic arias with the tenor Enrico Caruso as well as excerpts from the Italian opera *Il Pagliacci* with which he had first achieved international acclaim.<sup>36</sup> The Red Seal albums stood in the long tradition of the Porfirian opera, so popular in Mexico, that had seen music lovers congregating in the city's

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<sup>35</sup> AGN, TSJDF siglo XX, Box 1249

<sup>36</sup> *DAHR*, s.v. "Victor matrix B-7079. 'O sole mio / Emilio de Gogorza", accessed September 27, 2021, [[https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/200008042/B-7079-O\\_sole\\_mio](https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/200008042/B-7079-O_sole_mio)].

main theatres such as the Teatro National to listen to Verdi's *Traviata*, Bellini's *Sonnambula*, and the operetta *L'Elisir d'Amore* composed by Donizetti.<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, the entries for July 7<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> illustrate the popularity of the Black Label songs whose music features English-speaking comic songs, vaudeville artists, and military bands like John Philip Sousa's and Arthur Pryor's Orchestra performing marches, dances, and hymns.<sup>38</sup> The court records further underscore the popularity of airs and variations and other compositions rooted in nationalistic symbols and imagery that were typically performed in street parades and public events such as Carlos Francisco's Mexican National Anthem, the Robinson and Rosales Duet's National Airs, and For Freedom and Ireland performed by Albert Campbell.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *DAHR*, s.v. "Victor matrix C-3363. Ah! non giunge / Marcella Sembrich", accessed September 27, 2021, [https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/200004943/C-3363-Ah\_non\_giunge]; *DAHR*, s.v. "Victor matrix C-10099. Di Provenza il mar / Mario Sammarco; Victor Orchestra," accessed September 27, 2021, [https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/200010190/C-10099-Di\_Provenza\_il\_mar].

<sup>38</sup> *DAHR*, s.v. "Victor matrix C-6897. Danube waves waltz / Victor Dance Orchestra," accessed September 27, 2021, [https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/200007854/C-6897-Danube\_waves\_waltz].

<sup>39</sup> The transcription of sheet music based on Mexican traditional indigenous music like *El Zenzontle* and *Paseos de Santa Anita* became a common practice during the second half of the nineteenth century in Mexico. In this sense, *Hiawatha* composed by Kansas songwriter Charles Daniels was modified to fit into the growing craze for music featuring Native American music. For more information about the Mexican case, see: Laura Suárez de la Torre ed., *Los Papeles Para Euterpe: La Música En La Ciudad de México Desde La Historia Cultural Siglo XIX* (Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora: CONACyT, 2014). For the United States case, see: Michael A. Amundson, *Talking Machine West: A History and Catalogue of Tin Pan Alley's Western Recordings, 1902-1918* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017).

Order Date	Number	Format and Issue Serie	Issue year	Title	Artist
June 30th, 1913	62072	Black label (ethnic) 10-in. double-faced	1904	Guajiras de los de Cuba - Guajiras de vida mía	Antonio Pozo, "El Mochuelo"
	62036	Black label (ethnic) 10-in. double-faced	1909	El proceso de un borrachito en la comisaría - Discurso del vate coyote	Jesús Abrego ; Leopoldo Picazo
	62037	Black label (ethnic) 10-in. double-faced	1909	Pleito en un gramófono - Pleito en una casa de vecindad	Jesús Abrego ; Leopoldo Picazo
	62024	Black label (ethnic) 10-in. double-faced	1909	El zenzontle - El jarabe tapatío	Jesús Abrego ; Leopoldo Picazo
	62030	Black label (ethnic) 10-in. double-faced	1909	Amigo, amigo - Paseos de Santa Anita	Jesús Abrego ; Leopoldo Picazo
	63234	Black label (ethnic) 10-in. double-faced	1910	Aire nacional mexicano, no. 1 - Aire nacional mexicano, no. 2	Rafael Herrera Robinson ; Maximiliano Rosales
	63235	Black label (ethnic) 10-in. double-faced	1910	Aire nacional mexicano, no. 3 - Aire nacional mexicano, no. 4	Rafael Herrera Robinson ; Maximiliano Rosales
	63251	Black label (ethnic) 10-in. double-faced	1910	Perjura - Amparo	Orquesta Típica Lerdo
	68216	12-in. double-faced Imported and overseas	1909	Mazurka - Danube waves waltz	Victor Dance Orchestra
	68110	12-in. double-faced Imported and overseas	1907	Hiawatha - In a clock store / Victor Orchestra	Victor Orchestra [i.e., Pryor's Orchestra]
	*** 64136	Red Seal 10-in. single-faced	1909	O sole mio	Emilio de Gogorza
	*** 64136	Red Seal 10-in. single-faced	1909	O sole mio	Emilio de Gogorza
	88061	Red Seal 12-in. single-faced	1907	Vesti la giubba	Enrico Caruso
	88004	Red Seal 12-in. single-faced	1906	Spirto gentil	Enrico Caruso
	88027	Red Seal 12-in. single-faced	1906	Ah! non giunge	Marcella Sembrich
	88392	Red Seal 12-in. single-faced	1912	Pagliacci : Prologo Part 1	Titta Ruffo
	88393	Red Seal 12-in. single-faced	1912	Pagliacci : Prologo Part 2	Titta Ruffo
	88314	Red Seal 12-in. single-faced	1911	Di Provenza il mar	Mario Sammarco ; Victor Orchestra
	88339	Red Seal 12-in. single-faced	1911	Una furtiva lagrima	Enrico Caruso
	July 7th, 1913	62510	Black label (ethnic) 10-in. double-faced	1907	Jamón con yuca - Santiago
895		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1901	My old Dutch	Burt Shepard
893		Black label (popular) 10-in. single-faced	1902	I'd like to go halves in that	Burt Shepard
49		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	Parody on "The moth and the flame"	S. H. Dudley
220		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	For freedom and Ireland	Albert Campbell
346		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	The bride of the waves	Herbert L. Clarke ; Sousa's Band
26		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	Soldiers in the park	S. H. Dudley
46		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	Mr. Captain, stop the ship!	S. H. Dudley
379		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	Polka des clowns	Sousa's Band
63192		Black label (ethnic) 10-in. double-faced	1910	Chiqui, chiqui - La venganza de Toribio	Orquesta Babuco
253		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	Darktown is out to-night	Metropolitan Orchestra
226		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	Dance of the hoboos	George Schweinfest
239		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	Non è ver	George Schweinfest
251		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	Bunch o' blackberries	Metropolitan Orchestra
254		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	Girls of America march	Metropolitan Orchestra
68000		12-in. double-faced Imported and overseas	1909	Guarina - El gallo y el arado	Orquesta de Enrique Peña - Orquesta de Pablo Valenzuela
22		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1902	Doan ye cry, ma honey	S. H. Dudley
110		Black label (popular) 10-in. single-faced	1903?	French lessons	Frederick C. de Sumichrast
229		Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	Long, long ago	George Schweinfest
July 14th, 1913		62011	Black label (ethnic) 10-in. double-faced	1909	Emblema de paz - Alma gitana
	12	Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1902	I want to go to Morrow	Dan W. Quinn
	280	Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	Medley overture	Metropolitan Orchestra
	468	Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	The star	Jean Moeremans
	* 582	Black label (popular) 10-in. single-faced	1902	The whistling coon	George W. Johnson
	682	Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1901	A flower from the garden of life	Joseph Natus
	215	Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1902	Pickaninnies' polka	Charles P. Lowe
	** 785	Black label (popular) 10-in. single-faced	1901	Himno nacional de México	Sig. Carlos Francisco
	53	Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	The story of the rose	Harry Macdonough
	465	Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1900	Gounod's serenade	Jean Moeremans
	216	Black label (popular) 10-in. single-faced	1902	Dancing in the sunlight	Charles P. Lowe
	213	Black label (popular) 10-in. single-faced	1902	Du, du : With variations	Charles P. Lowe
	214	Black label (popular) 10-in. single-faced	1901	My old Kentucky home	Charles P. Lowe
	299	Black label (popular) 7-in. single-faced	1902	Independence bell	William F. Hooley
	63602	Black label (ethnic) 10-in. double-faced	1910	El Conde Lotario - Amores y amorios	Sra. Grifell ; Paco Martínez
	63601	Black label (ethnic) 10-in. double-faced	1910	Amores y amorios - Guajira del ciclón	Sra. Grifell
	** 785	Black label (popular) 10-in. single-faced	1901	Himno nacional de México	Sig. Carlos Francisco
	* 582	Black label (popular) 10-in. single-faced	1902	The whistling coon	George W. Johnson
	249	Black label (popular) 10-in. single-faced	1904	The mocking bird	Charles D'Almaine

Table 1. Records ordered by Jesus Santoscoy from June 30<sup>th</sup> to July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1913, AGN, TSJDF siglo XX, 1249.

Finally, many of the pieces chosen by the dealer fell under the Black label's ethnic stream, with a preference for Cuban and Mexican songs. Most of these compositions were declamatory works, jocose songs, parodies, and comedy sketches widely recognized as part of puppetry arts.

The aforementioned comic accent resonated with the political militancy of Porfirian wage workers at the beginning of the twentieth century. Musical offerings included the guitar duet of Abrego and Picazo as well as those of Rosales and Robinson and Contreras and Carrillo, who had honed their craft on the music circuit, performing at itinerant circuses, puppetry companies, variety shows, and other urban entertainment venues. As Natalia Bieletto comments, their performance appears to be connected to the "literary subgenre "cuadro costumbrista," also known in English literary scholarship as "essay or sketch of manners." Derived from literary costumbrism, the purpose of these "sketches" is to describe popular types, behaviors or habits considered representative of a given profession, cultural region, or social class by means of nostalgic or satirical representations".<sup>40</sup>

Given the lack of in-depth historical studies of Mexican recording pioneers, these records allows for a rare act of "eavesdropping" on the listening practices of Mexico City's residents in the early twentieth century. Dealers such as Jesus Santoscoy Gonzalez served as the interface between local musical customs and an increasingly global circulation of music recordings. In getting phonographic records into the hands of his customers, Gonzalez — like so many other actors in the Mexican music industry — participated in the global commodification of music, while bending its practices to local customs. As scholars of

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<sup>40</sup> *Costumbrismo* is a literary and artistic genre that seeks the recognition of the popular archetypes of Mexicanidad and the characterization of manners and customs associated with it with the purpose of extolling nationalistic sentiments and promoting social reforms. See, M. Natalia Bieletto-Bueno, "'Es Siempre Preferible La Carpa a La Pulquería': The Construction of Poverty in the Music of the Carpas Shows in Mexico City, 1890-1930", PhD Dissertation (UCLA, 2015): 205.

consumer culture in Porfirian Mexico suggest, deep-rooted retailing practices revealed a high degree of sociability and personal connections, especially when some goods were taken home to fulfill the need for approval from friends and family.<sup>41</sup>

Early-twentieth-century Mexican consumer culture became a significant component of the families' daily economy. A broad spectrum of the capital's households combined different sources of financing plans to make it until the next paycheck. As Marie Eileen Francois contends: "middle-class people maintained the level of consumption commensurate with their status through credit secured with collateral that was also bought on credit".<sup>42</sup> Pawnshops or *casas de empeño*, such as El Monte de Piedad located in the heart of Mexico City's financial district since the eighteenth century, remained a site of collateral-credit practices of both middle-class clientele and their servants. According to Francois, even though loans were secured with personal possessions, property, or even prestige, this did not deter some clients from gambling with their collateral possessions, leading to abuse and embezzlement. Embracing the cycle of pawning, redeeming, and re-pawning was essential to maintain the ability of respectable families to consume luxury goods for public display.<sup>43</sup> These credit practices were increasingly employed to mitigate the clear deterioration of the rural and urban classes' living conditions due to the impact of the crisis years starting in 1907 and eventually leading to the social uprising of 1910. They show the fluidity of understandings about personal ownership and reveal the advantages of obtaining phonographic devices with just only one monthly payment on lease-to-own contract.

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<sup>41</sup> Steven B. Bunker, *Creating Mexican Consumer Culture in the Age of Porfirio Díaz* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> Marie Eileen Francois, *A Culture of Everyday Credit: Housekeeping, Pawnbroking, and Governance in Mexico City, 1750-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 173.

<sup>43</sup> Marie Eileen Francois, *A Culture of Everyday Credit*, 21

As court records indicate, middle-class customers did not feel bound by the stipulations contained in promissory notes nor by the concept of private ownership that American businesses in Mexico City upheld. Payment of the initial installment rate was sufficient to allow customers to start using the phonograph in the privacy of their homes. Many clients then decided to make a profit by pawning the phonograph for a fraction of its cost, even though the device was not yet legally theirs. (Ownership of the phonograph would pass from the store to the client only upon the full payment of the purchase price.)

The photograph entitled “People Lined up at the Window of the Monte de Piedad” (*Gente Formada en una Ventanilla del Monte de Piedad*) from the Casasola Archive affords a glimpse into this common practice:



Figure 7. People Lined up at the Window of the Monte de Piedad, *Mediateca - Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, accessed June 2, 2019, [http://mediateca.inah.gob.mx/islandora\\_74/islandora/object/fotografia%3A4673](http://mediateca.inah.gob.mx/islandora_74/islandora/object/fotografia%3A4673)



Taken during the first decade of the twentieth century, the image shows a bustling crowd waiting its turn to trade personal possessions for a few coins. In contrast to the movement of people on the image's right-hand side, the left hand of the scene captures the immobility of the goods. The shelves are adorned with formal attire, waiting to be reclaimed by their owners, while home furnishings sit on the floor side by side with modern technology. The small portable phonograph at the center of the photograph (presumably an engraved edition of a Victor Talking Machine) could fetch loans for up to ten pesos and offers clear evidence of the value of phonographs in the petty trade.<sup>44</sup>

## CONCLUSION

To explore the history of the phonograph in Mexico City allows us to understand its role in the local economic system of the Porfirian period. The present work exposes the faulty assumption that —due to deficiency of products manufactured in Mexico— Mexico City's pawnshops and black markets offered working-class customers the only pathway to the ownership of foreign-manufactured luxury goods. This interpretation, put forward by American historians such as Andrew Konove, tends to reduce the capital's consumers to a largely passive role and obscures the diverse and imaginative ways in which Mexican inventors, dealers, and distributors participated in the music industry.<sup>45</sup>

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the pressures on multinational phonographic companies to create a niche for Spanish-speaking records led to an extended system of music production dependent mostly on local impresarios. These networks of musicians, producers, and distributors were co-opted as the industry's executives sought to exert greater control

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<sup>44</sup> *Gente Formada en una Ventanilla del Monte de Piedad*  
[http://mediateca.inah.gob.mx/islandora\\_74/islandora/object/fotografia%3A4673](http://mediateca.inah.gob.mx/islandora_74/islandora/object/fotografia%3A4673)

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Konove, *Black Market Capital. Urban Politics and the Shadow Economy in Mexico City* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2018).

over the subsidiaries. This process of commodification of local music remained contested well into the 1910s and was shaped by local consumer practices that differed sharply from American ones. Convinced of their racial and cultural superiority, American businessmen were slow to grasp local ways of doing business that were rooted in personal connections, close social networks, and communal exchanges.

## CONCLUSION

On May 16, 1912, just one year before the armed stage of the revolutionary civil war broke out in Mexico City, readers of the newspaper *El Dictamen* woke up to a detailed complaint about the musical disturbances caused by three men living on 5 de Mayo Street. The chronicler requested the presence of the police to silence the men's non-stop "performance" that had disturbed the neighbourhood. According to the article, on the street lived a man who played the piano at all hours. Another resident nearby liked to listen (and loudly so) to music on his phonograph, while yet a third neighbour kept shouting and singing incessantly. On a single street, continued the story, "the three pesky men have greatly annoyed their neighbours."<sup>1</sup> By the second decade of the twentieth-century, such complaints about city sounds (which were typically heard as noise) were becoming more frequent.

In less than thirty-five years, the arrival of sound-reproducing technology had altered the aural texture of the metropolis. The people of Mexico City had become familiar with the phonograph in a process that involved three stages. After a market for the sale and distribution of blank phonographs had been established, local recording labels sprang up that drew upon the expertise and creativity of local networks of musicians, performers, recording technicians, merchants, dealers, and petty entrepreneurs. In a second stage, the technical refinement of the disc replication process allowed for an exponential growth of the industry. The intense competition between phonographic companies prompted the major players to consolidate their foreign branches and create a sales office exclusively for the Latin American market. In a final stage, the standardization of the technology allowed for a refinement of the

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<sup>1</sup> Tarugadas, *El Dictamen* (16<sup>th</sup> May 1912): 4.

phonograph cabinet that was praised for its functionality and aesthetic appeal and marketed as a popular home entertainment product.

This study has tracked distinct genealogies of aural modernity, taking a cue from Bart Barendrecht's assertion that modernity constitutes a set of relations that foster novel interpretations regarding social change, technology, progress, and human agency.<sup>2</sup> As I have argued, the development of sound technology in Mexico between 1878 and 1913 did not, by itself, usher in an era of modern aurality. Rather, a Mexican aural modernity emerged from the aural practices and embodied knowledge with which members of the lettered elites, middle- and working-class inhabitants, petty entrepreneurs and musicians approached the phonograph. Sound constituted an object to be contemplated, reconstructed, and manipulated, its meanings inextricably intertwined with the tenets of an emerging consumer culture. As we have seen, the meanings of this new technology were shaped by local ontologies of listening which refined the concept of usage of imported mechanical production of sound in a living act of syncretism with local aural expressions. Ostensibly modern, this emerging twentieth-century Mexican soundscape carried traditional acoustic dimensions; etched into it were the vocalities of indigenous, Afro-descended, and mestizo peoples.

Since its arrival in Mexico in 1878, the phonograph had embodied principles of modernization, cosmopolitanism, and progress for members of the industrial and cultured elites. Government authorities had granted concessions, passed constitutional amendments, and bestowed special privileges upon American entrepreneurs to promote a federal phonographic messaging system that would connect the nation. Although this project was

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<sup>2</sup> Bart Barendrecht, "Sonic Histories in A Southeast Asian Context," in *Sonic Modernities in the Malay World*, ed. Bart Barendrecht, (Brill, 2014), 1–44.

never realized, it gave rise to initiatives among upper-class circles to regulate sound technology and restrict its use to those citizens who (in the condescending parlance of social reformers) understood the concepts of civility and hygiene. The initial campaign to prevent contagion soon spread beyond the physiological ear diseases supposedly transmitted by the “machine-parrot” to morph into debates on how to cultivate the ears and tongues of the multi-ethnic labour migrants who were arriving in the capital and how to educate them in the correct use of the Spanish language.<sup>3</sup> In line with the perceived need to isolate and restrain those out-of-tune aural cultures, Porfirian social reformers stressed the need to avoid the mingling of different social and ethnic classes. These regulatory campaigns involved attempts to restrict the populace’s access to the phonograph. Mercantile houses located in the financial center of the city offered their products only to the middle- and upper classes, thereby limiting the supply.

Later attempts to normalize the new technology in popular entertainment venues gave lower- and working-class city dwellers access to the talking machine. Slowly, the streets and squares of the city became a contested terrain for petty entrepreneurs who seized upon the technological innovation available at phonographic workshops and repair stores. The long-standing aural codes of criers, advertising their wares, were embraced by phonographic exhibitors who imbued the auditory landscape with high-pitched scratchy vocalizations and local idioms. The aural reconfiguration of public space carried out by petty entrepreneurs was central to the formation of a Mexican aural modernity. Phonographic vendors benefitted from the adaptation of the listening horn and improved upon established local sonic codes — such as repetition, a wide-ranging repertoire of calls, and particular vocalizations — to market their products. This process was concomitant with a flourishing

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<sup>3</sup> See, “Maquina Parlante”. *The Mexican Herald* (Mexico, 25<sup>th</sup> March 1902): 2.

political militancy of waged workers who claimed the city's public spaces with increasing flair and confidence. The mutual support networks of itinerant public criers and amusement announcers allowed working-class people and marginalized social groups to assert their public presence in the city ever more vocally.

Chapter Two then turned to the commercial and popular credit practices related to the acquisition of phonographic devices in Mexico City. Such deep-rooted economic practices were widely employed throughout Mexican social groups, showing signs of a high degree of sociability and cross-class collaboration. As the analysis of the court's legal files demonstrates, Mexico City's inhabitants were not necessarily bound by the established protocols of foreign phonographic subsidiary companies. Instead, the capital's residents mobilized the logic of collateral credit to gain access to the new technology, in the process subverting Global Northern assumptions of credit and consumption. Through the reactions displayed by the managers of Foreign Departments from Victor Talking Machine, Edison's National Phonograph, and Columbia Phonograph, I was able to document how some of the acoustic dimensions of existing aural cultures such as the vocalizations and instrumentation popular among indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and mestizos were transposed into early sound recordings.

As this study has suggested, the novel sound recording technology that arrived in Mexico in 1878 was accompanied by well-worn notions of Western superiority and consumer practices, even though the eventual uses of this technology had yet to coalesce. The involvement of community networks of users, both commercial and domestic, was crucial to determining how sound was understood and regulated. Following Ochoa's concept of aurality, it is possible to speculate on the tensions between different notions of acoustic practices. *Sonorous Remnants of the Past* contributes to the study of aurality and

sound recording in the Global South by critically examining the role of technological transmission and its interaction with social and cultural dynamics that then shaped its innovation, meaning, and use. Sound technology's dissemination, cultural adaptation, and creative refashioning echoed a profound transformation in the cultural and economic conditions that shaped the audible worlds of Mexico City's urban dwellers into a modern one.

## ABBREVIATIONS

Archivo General de la Nación (AGN)

Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal (AHDF)

Discography of American Historical Recordings (DAHR)

Thomas Edison National Historical Park (TENHP)

Tribunal Superior de Justicia del Distrito Federal, Siglo XX (TSJD, Siglo XX)

University of California Santa Barbara- Cylinder Audio Archive (UCSB-CAA)



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Tribunal Superior de Justicia del Distrito Federal, Siglo XX (TSJD, Siglo XX)

Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal (AHDF), Mexico City

Diversiones Publicas

Policía en General

##### United States of America

Library of Congress, Washington, DC

Recorded Sound Section

Tim Walsh Paper

New York Public Library, New York City

Performing Arts Research Collection

Thomas Edison National Historical Park (TENHP), New Jersey

Rutgers University, New Jersey

The Papers of Thomas A. Edison

#### *Digital Archives*

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*La Voz de México* (Mexico City)  
*El País* (Mexico City)  
*El Comico* (Mexico City)  
*The Mexican Herald* (Mexico City)  
*El Seminario Literario Ilustrado* (Mexico City)  
*El Tiempo Ilustrado* (Mexico City)  
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