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# Johannes Brahms in the Lindström Recording Studio

*Expanded paper of a lecture held on May 9th 2010 at the 11th International Conference of Discography ("11. Diskografentag") in Hildesheim.*

In late October 1889, Adelbert Theodore Wangemann, Edison's emissary for the introduction of the improved phonograph into Europe, arrived in Vienna, where he stayed at the Grand Hotel. The bearded Wangemann is seen standing behind Edison on the only image I know of him (see figure 1). Soon after his arrival, Wangemann received from the Edison Laboratory in West Orange new cylinder blanks of a light yellowish brown colour, mixed from a new and more stable compound which was better adapted for recording music. They replaced the soft, sticky white wax blanks used until then. (1)

In the forenoon, the phonograph was reserved for important artists and academics, to make the instrument known and, of course, to make recordings, which Wangemann afterwards performed to notables for free, and at public gatherings against payment. Six persons could always hear the phonograph at the same time through earphones. Demonstrations with mounted horn were also performed occasionally, but the sound was less true to the original, being much lower and metallic.

*Fig. 1 The bearded Wangemann standing behind Edison*

The visit of Johannes Brahms at the Vienna Grand Hotel on October 30th, 1889 was especially highlighted by the press. (2) Brahms heard, among other things, an aria sung by Lili Lehmann, a spoken telegram by Werner von Siemens and a piano piece. He wrote to Clara Schumann: "It's as though one were living a fairy-tale," and presented Wangemann an artist picture of himself with the dedication: "The sound is not from earth." (3) Three days later, the mezzosoprano Rosa Papier recorded Brahms' "Sapphische Ode", which was soon afterwards performed to the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph. A press report mentions the recording of some of Brahms' dances by the famous pianist Alfred Grünfeld with a newly introduced funnel on November 14th, 1889, which was mounted at the underside of the instrument. (4) On December 2nd, 1889 a few days after a private gathering at the house of Dr. Richard Albert Fellinger, the head of the Vienna branch of Siemens & Halske, Wangemann came back to demonstrate some of his latest cylinders and to record Johannes Brahms, as arranged with him before.

Richard Fellinger, one of Dr. Fellinger's sons, described the order of events: At first, Brahms was so excited that he felt unable to perform. When he was ready, he couldn't wait and teased poor Wangemann and his assistant to hurry. As with Grünfeld, the funnel was mounted at the underside of the piano. Wangemann spoke an introduction in German. Suddenly Brahms interrupted him calling out: "Gespielt von Frau Dr. Fellinger!", and began playing. (5) Indeed I noticed that the introduction is spoken by two persons: "Dezember 1889, [and in another voice] im Haus von Herrn Doktor Fellinger, by [sic] Herrn Doktor Brahms, Johannes Brahms." As the introductory remark by Brahms would make no sense, I conclude that Richard Fellinger misunderstood or wrongly remembered the incident.

The cylinder, presented by Wangemann to Dr. Fellinger on this evening, was long forgotten by the public when Richard Fellinger noted in his memoirs that it was extremely difficult to reproduce, because the sound was too weak and, despite of several attempts, a suitable method hadn't yet been found. (6) Obviously the cylinder was played more than once on an Edison phonograph the family had bought for that purpose. Early cylinders are comparatively soft, requiring a lightweight reproducer like the Edison Standard speaker, and are usually reproduced by earphones. The family members certainly had no clue about such technical refinement. I am sure they employed a common Edison phonograph model with a heavy automatic or, even worse, a Model C reproducer and destroyed the groove with each play-back. Later, the phonograph was equipped with an electric reproducer, but the damage was already done.

The course of events in January 1935 is controversial. Ludwig Koch, director of the culture department of Carl Lindström AG (see figure 2) claimed that Fellinger approached him, asking if he would try to improve the recording by transferring it to disc. (7) Fritz Bose, director of the newly created music department of the *Institute for Sound Research* at the University of Berlin, which was founded on April 1st, 1920 by Wilhelm Doegen as *Archive of Sound*, told another story. Thus Bose had discovered the Brahms cylinder and written to Fellinger on January 12, 1935 for his approval to dub the cylinder to disc, to which the same had consented four days later. (8) Be that as it may, Fellinger handed over the precious cylinder, padded with cotton wool, in a special box manufactured of mahogany and crystal glass.

*Fig. 2 Ludwig Koch during field recordings*

When he was a boy, Koch had met Johannes Brahms who told him about the wax cylinder of 1889, but the famous pianist did not know what became of it. Naturally, Koch was extremely curious about the recording, but wrote in 1955 that the piano could hardly be distinguished through the loud noises due to inexperienced recording. (9) This was a posthumous slap in the face of Wangemann, responsible for Edison's recording department since 1888, who had died shortly after 1900 in a traffic accident. Despite the shortcomings, the cylinder was important enough and Fritz Bose exploited its rediscovery and transfer on disc in the national press.

No doubt it was also a valuable addition to the stock of the *Institute for Sound Research*. Each recording made for the collection of the institute was documented in an application form. Fritz Bose had approved serial number La 1415, recorded at a quarter past six in the evening of January 23, 1935. The application form mentions that the sound level of the Strauss waltz was lower than the record groove noise, and that the dubbing was therefore broken off after the last bars of the preceding Hungarian Dance. (10)

Ludwig Koch was responsible for the transfer by means of either a microphone put up in front of a phonograph horn or, more likely, an electric pick-up applied on an Edison phonograph. The signal output was amplified and filtered from disturbing noises before it drove a cutting head to inscribe the sound on a Draloston disc. (11) This recording medium, an aluminium disc coated with a thin layer of lacquer had been manufactured since 1932 by the Dralowid plant in Berlin, Pankow. The lacquer was soft enough to be cut and less fragile than wax. After hardening in an oven for two hours it could be replayed a number of times.

A small monogram with the sequence number "OB9" is carved in the dead wax under the matrix number (see figure 3). It shows that Lindström's recording engineer Otto Birkhahn transferred the sound recording from the Draloston disc, completed with a spoken introduction, to the wax master. (12) By electroplating the wax master, a stamper was created to press a small number of shellac discs. All had a paper label of the *Institute for Sound Research* with handwritten information. Instrumental recordings like the Brahms disc got an orange label, voice recordings a green label (see figure 4). (13) The inscription reads "Brahms Edison cylinder dubbed 1935" (*Brahms Edison Walze überspielt 1935*).


*Fig. 3 Birkhahn's small monogram "OB9" on the left, under the serial number "La 1415", whereby "La" is synonymous for Archive of Sound ("Lautarchiv")*

On June 3rd, 1937, under pressure from Fritz Bose who stirred up hatred against the Fellingers claiming that they deprived the Brahms recording from the German people, the cylinder was presented to Professor Schünemann, director of the music department of the then *Prussian State Library* in Berlin. (14) Only three and a half years after the first transfer, the Brahms cylinder was again dubbed on disc on September 20th, 1938. At least two takes were recorded, this time also containing the Strauss waltz, and pressed by Telefunken Platte G.m.b.H. on double-sided discs. The music department at *Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin* holds two sample shellac pressings of the Telefunken disc. (15)

All stampers kept in the *Institute for Sound Research* were destroyed during the war and the 1935 Brahms transfer is not among the 4500 surviving shellacs. Hence it was thought that all that remained was the Draloston disc presented by Ludwig Koch to the *National Sound Archive* in London, now a department of the British Library. But a short time ago, a genuine Lindström pressing of 1935 in good condition surfaced which


*Fig. 4 Label scan of the 1935 Lindström pressing*

is now in the possession of the lecturer. The talk was accompanied by a demonstration of a newly made digital transfer of this record. (16)

On December 20th, 2010, the lecturer heard at the *Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin* a transfer of the Telefunken shellac pressings on DAT tape, with the sad conclusion that the original 1889 recording had gotten much worse in the short period between 1935 and 1938. Only small fragments of both the introduction and Brahms' piano playing, disturbed by numerous pops from cracks, could be identified. Besides physical damage by breakage, the cylinder was obviously played with the wrong reproducer before the small remnants were again dubbed on disc.

In this condition the cylinder survived the war. Several attempts have been made during the 1980s and 90s to bring out the best of it. The wax substance itself is in comparatively good condition with very little mold on the surface, but a large piece had broken off and the cylinder was cracked several times with loss of substance. Even after elaborate restoration at the *Phonogram Archive* in Vienna in 1997 it must be stated that the grooves are now largely destroyed.

**Endnotes:**

(1) "The first shipment of these new blanks I received in Vienna. [...] The blanks in Vienna, after being recorded, would keep their glossy clean surface; some of these records today, are just as clean as when they were made. [...]" *American Graphophone Company versus National Phonograph Company on Macdonald Patent No. 606.725.* (U.S. Circuit Court. District of New Jersey. In Equity.) Adelbert Theodore E. Wangemann. Testimony on Behalf of Defendant, 29 December 1905. Direct Examination by Frank L. Dyer, p. 191 (TAED QP003224)

(2) *Die Presse*, Vienna, Vol. 42, Nr. 299, 30 October 1889, p. 15

(3) Richard Fellinger, Klänge um Brahms, Erinnerungen, Berlin 1933, cited in: Günter Große, Von der Edisonwalze zur Stereoplatte, 2nd revised edition, Berlin 1989, p. 19

(4) *Die Presse, Local Anzeiger*, Vienna, Vol. 42, Supplement to Nr. 315, 15 November 1889, p. 14

(5) Richard Fellinger *op. cit.* pp. 20-21

(6) *Ibid.* p. 21

(7) Ludwig Koch, Memoirs of a Birdman, London 1955, pp. 32-33

(8) Imogen Fellinger, Kommentar, in: Dietrich Schüller, ed., Tondokumente aus dem Phonogrammarchiv der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Brahms spielt Klavier, Historische Stimmen aus Wien, CD with booklet, Vienna 1997, p. 6

(9) Koch *op. cit.* p. 33

(10) From the collection of the *Archive of Sound* at Humboldt University of Berlin. The application form was made available to me by courtesy of Jürgen-K. Mahrenholz

(11) Also known under the designation Draloton. Koch *op. cit.* p. 16

(12) Otto Birkhahn's monogram is listed on Hugo Strötbaum's website. http://www.recordingpioneers.com/ Visit from November 22, 2010

(13) Information by e-mail on April 26, 2010 from Rainer E. Lotz

(14) Imogen Fellinger *op. cit.* pp. 7-8

(15) Telefunken "Unverkäufliche Musterplatte", double-sided disc, matrix TP 1052/1052-I, shelf number S Pl 10720/ 10720 U. Two samples are kept. One is inscribed "Prof. Schünemann", and, in another hand, "Brahms Ed. Walze überspielt 20. IX. 1938"

(16) Digital transfer of the Lindström shellac pressing by Norman Bruderhofer, Berlin