

So You Thought Edison Was the First Recording Superstar?

You never know what kind of nuggets you'll get from our newsletter. This month we can report that scientists have finally confirmed that a Frenchman, E. L. Scott made a true audio recording almost 20 years before Edison! So, should we get out the scissors and white-out to update the history books? Not quite yet, for you see Scott only thought he made a recording of a voice. He really wasn't sure - and neither was anyone else - because he failed to invent any way to play back his recordings.

The Scott system, called a **Phonautogram**, was the cause of this problem. The recording was made by fastening a quill (some say a cactus needle) onto a horn and then allowing it to vibrate as it moved across paper (or glass) darkened with smoke from an oil lamp. The result was visible squiggles on the paper that corresponded to the vibrations of audio.

So it would be almost 150 years later until scientists used high resolution scanners and specialized software to actually decode these surviving recordings and turn them back into audio. You can hear one of them recorded in the 1860s here:

[Click Here](#)

Here's a bit cleaner version done with DC LIVE/Forensics

[Click Here](#)

So, does Scott belong in the history books? Sure. Did he invent a practical recording device? No way. Thomas Edison remains as the undisputed champion - in our opinion, of course. BTW, remember I said that even Scott was not really sure he was actually making a recording? We now know that this concern was justified as most of his earlier "recordings" suffered from a technical problem and don't really have any recoverable audio on them.

But that's not all of the story:

The Scott Saga - Part 2

Scott has recently been in the news with the playback of his original recordings as we noted above, but it wasn't the first time. He also played a large roll in the April 1990 issue of Classical CD magazine. This magazine was one of the first to include a CD of classical music with the mag and this issue included the breathtaking news that a very early audio recording had been found in a subway excavation and the issue included an actual recording of Chopin himself playing his Minute Waltz. According to the article, the recording was inscribed on smoked glass just like Scott, but was done even 20 years earlier by a guy name Sot. This should have been a clue .

The recording sounded authentic with lots of awful noise, but you could hear the piano playing - and it was done with a very high degree of skill. In fact, the Waltz was played in almost exactly one minute - an insane speed only rumored to have been achieved by one other piano player - Liberace. BTW, the word Minute in French can mean "60 seconds" or it can mean "small".

For a while, many in the classic music community believed the story due to the authentic sound, the great skill of the player and the authentic details that were similar to the Scott Phonautogram system.

But alas, this was the April issue of the magazine and, sure enough, this was a clever April Fools joke. There was no smoked glass recording of Chopin himself, no connection to Scott, just a great joke - and more than a few red faces.

I looked high and low for this recording, but haven't been able to find it. If anyone has one, we'd be glad to hear it.

Probably also a good time to mention our Restored Edison Recordings that we sell here:

[Click Here](#)

These were recovered from the Edison Museum in New Jersey by our engineers...you know, the ones who make DC SEVEN, Audio Mentor, Millennium, etc. In fact, the reason these products exist today was mostly to remove the noise from these cool old recordings made by Thomas Edison.

These CDs are not cheap (around 18 bucks each), but I can tell you that you would really enjoy them. They have such a lively manner and are about as upbeat and catchy as you can possibly imagine. I would venture a guess that if you bought one to try, you may find yourself dialing up Tracer again in the future.