

Carl Lindström AG: the international series

Pekka Gronow / GHT Immenstadt 2008-05-24

Carl Lindström AG was one of the multinational companies which dominated the shellac era until the second World War. Victor, Columbia, Gramophone and Lindström operated in most countries of the world and were responsible for a major part of global record production.

Compared to the other major companies, the international operations of Lindström have been little studied. There is no Lindström company history comparable to Peter Martland's books on Gramophone/EMI, Tim Brooks' Columbia book and the Fagan-Moran listings of Victor records.

It is possible to study Lindström from many different viewpoints. A business historian would be interested in the development of a German multinational company and its relations with the other major companies. As discographers and music historians, we are interested in the recordings made by Lindström and their background.

In the long run it is not possible to separate these two aspects. Much of the paper documentation related to the Lindström company has been lost, but the records themselves are important documents of the company's activities. If we had a complete discography of Lindström recordings, it would already be the foundation of the company's business history. Records are a record company's principal products, and a discography would show us the extent of the company's activities in various countries. We could even make a rough estimate of the company's sales on the basis of the number of copies circulating among collectors.

On the other hand, in the absence of paper documents, the discographer often has to use his knowledge of company history to date his recordings. In what factory were the records pressed, what label was used, how was the company name spelled, and other such details can often be used to date records – not to speak of the practice of using the chronology of catalogue and matrix series as an aid to dating.

Why did Odeon start a special A 280900 series in Finland in the 1930s, when the company's main series was A 280000? The special series is easier to understand if we know that all the recordings in

the series are Parlophon masters from the end of the Finnish Parlophon series. The 280900 series obviously comes from a period when Lindström was closing down its Parlophon agency in Finland and concentrated all activities on the Odeon label. The need for a special series possibly arose from agreements with the two agents, we do not know exactly, but in any case it is clear that the recordings were made in spring 1931 and probably issued in 1932-33. A similar case is the issue of a series of Homocord masters in the A 228000 series at the same time, But why were these issues pressed in England, while the rest of the A 228000 series were German pressings? Possibly because of the British connection of the Homocord label?

Lindström history: four periods

The history of Lindström has already been discussed here in other contexts, I shall just present a brief summary here. The company's history until World War Two can be divided into four distinct periods.

1. Carl Lindström AG was founded in 1904, but originally the company only produced gramophones and related equipment. Between 1910 and 1912 Lindström acquired at least five established German record companies in order to get a foot in the record business. By purchasing Beka, Odeon, Fonotipia, Favorite, Dacapo and Lyrophon, Lindström obtained not only a valuable catalogue of records, but experienced personnel, manufacturing capacity, and a network of agents and representatives on most continents.
2. The era of Lindström as an independent multinational record company lasts from c. 1910 to 1925. This period saw a quick expansion of production and activities. New factories were founded, including three in South America. A factory was purchased in Sweden in 192?. Some of the old labels were discontinued. The Parlophon trade mark, which had been used for gramophones, was now introduced as a record label. Odeon and Beka were also continued, but the other labels were gradually wound down.

The First World War and the following inflation naturally caused great problems for the company, and after the war, most of the Lindström activities outside Germany were organised under Transoceanic Trading Co, a holding company registered in the Netherlands.

3. In 1926, the British Columbia Graphophone Co purchased Lindström. This move was connected with the introduction of electrical recording, and Lindström now became part of a larger concern which included, in addition to Columbia in Britain, also Columbia Phonograph Co in the USA. A few years later the Columbia-Lindström concern also obtained French Pathé, Japanese Nipponophon, and the Homocord company, which had branches in several European countries. Columbia also purchased the General Phonograph Co of NY (OKeh), which had had close ties with Lindström. The company's name was changed to OKeh Phonograph Co.

The late 1920s were boom years in the record business. The operations of the Lindström company continued much as before. New agencies were opened in many countries. In the "Festschrift" published in Berlin in 1929, Lindström is presented as a fully independent company, with Columbia's director Louis Sterling as a board member.

In daily operations, there was not much co-operation between Columbia and Lindström. Outwardly they continued to compete with each other, although some activities were obviously coordinated. In Germany, Columbia's retail stores were brought under Lindström. Lindström and Columbia also started a matrix exchange.

4. In 1931, Columbia and Gramophone (HMV) merged to form Electric & Musical Industries Ltd. Lindström also became part of concern, but the headquarters stayed in Germany.

The record boom was now over, in many countries record sales declined to one-tenth of the figures of 1929. All companies had to rationalise their operations, and Lindström discontinued many catalogue series and closed down some agencies. Outwardly Lindström, Columbia and Gramophone continued as competitors, but in many cases the same technicians were in charge of their recording activities. Probably this rationalisation would have continued, but it was stopped by the outbreak of the war.

The Lindström organisation between the world wars

It can be concluded from the above that Lindström was a very complicated organisation. Lindström alone controlled a number of different companies, some active, some passive. The company's products appeared under several different trade marks such as Parlophon, Odeon and Beka. Since 1925, Lindström itself was part of a larger international concern, first Columbia and then EMI. The companies both competed and co-operated in various ways. To understand the discography of Lindström, we need to understand the business.

In 1940, Dietrich Schulz-Köhn published one of the first academic dissertations on the recording industry, "Die Schallplatte auf dem Weltmarkt". Schulz-Köhn had close connections with the German industry, and he was able to present much valuable information which has not been available elsewhere. His book also contains an organisational chart of the Lindström company in the 1930s. It is not very detailed, but a good start. I present here only the part of Lindström organisation which was outside Germany (with some additions).

Columbia Graphophone Co. (UK)

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Carl Lindström AG (Germany)

** Parlophone Ltd (London, founded 1923)

** Nipponophone (acquired in 1927 with Columbia)

** Pathé Frères, France (acquired in 1927 with Columbia)

** Skandinaviska Odeon

** Argentina

** Poland

** Fonotipia Ltd (London)

--- Fonotipia (Milano)

--- Odeon (Paris)

--- Odeon (Barcelona)

--- Odeon (Wien)

(The group of companies lowest on the list represents the organisation of the International Talking Machine Co GmbH, acquired by Lindström in 1911.)

The countries represented in the organisational chart were also (more or less) the countries where Lindström had established local factories. These regional companies represented the most

important record markets in the world. In South America alone, Lindström had factories in Argentina, Chile and Brazil. Photographs of the factories show that they were of impressive size, much bigger than any record pressing plant of the vinyl era that I know. Of course these factories were not just pressing plants, they were probably also used to produce gramophones and other related equipment.

The Lindström Festschrift published in 1929 also shows pictures of the Argentinean partner, Firma Max Glücksmann. The photo shows more than a hundred staff members. Again it must be remembered that Glücksmann was probably involved in other related businesses, but it gives us an idea of the scope of the organisation.

Some regional branches also had their own labels. In Sweden, Skandinaviska Odeon had the Ekophon label, which was used both for original Swedish recordings and reissues of German and American material. The Argentinean branch had a “Disco Nacional” label.

In smaller countries, Lindström usually relied on local agents. They could be music stores or larger enterprises, like the Finnish Odeon agent Pohjoismainen Sähkö Oy, whose businesses included a factory producing electrical equipment and a department store selling household appliances, lamps, radios, musical instruments and records. It is interesting to note that in many countries Lindström had several competing agents representing different labels. Usually there was one agent for Odeon and another for Parlophone - Beka. Each label had its own artists, who were contracted by the local agent. It would be interesting to know how the various product lines were handled in Berlin. Were there separate managers for each label, or did the same person in Berlin have responsibility for all business in, say, Finland or Romania? Were the same studios and technicians used? It is interesting to note that in the 1929-31 period, all Finnish Parlophon records were recorded in Berlin, while most Odeon sides were cut in Helsinki.

We also need to know more about the relationship between the regional Lindström companies and the local agents. The Parlophone Ltd (London) had its own local agents in various parts of the British Empire, including Australia and New Zealand. Records made in French colonies such as Morocco and Vietnam were pressed in France, and the agents probably dealt with the French regional branch. In Europe, most of the smaller countries which did not have their own factories seem to have dealt directly with the Berlin office.

A full list of Lindström agencies is not yet available. The 1929 Festschrift shows a photo of the Ethiopian agent, obviously a small record shop in Addis Abeba. We know that Lindström made recordings in many African colonies, including Nigeria, Gold Coast, Tanganyika, Uganda, Madagascar and even the small island of Reunion, and there must have been local agents to handle the choice of artists and the distribution of the finished products. In addition to regular agents, Lindström would also make records or lease older material for other enterprises as “custom pressings”. In Sweden alone, Lindström material has been discovered on store-labels such as Norrlandsskivan, Stjärn-rekord, Matador and Skön-ton.

Lindström in America

Lindström’s operations in the USA must be discussed separately. In the 1910s, the Columbia and Victor companies controlled the basic disc recording patents in the United States, and effectively prevented new companies of entering the record business. Only companies producing vertical-cut discs were allowed to compete on the market, until the US Supreme Court found the Columbia-Victor duopoly illegal in 1922.

Before that time, the French Pathé company had already established a subsidiary company in the United States. Lindström must also have been interested, but for unknown reasons no Lindström agency was started there. Instead Otto Heinemann, who had been one of Lindström’s directors, moved to New York, and on November 5, 1914 started producing vertical-cut records on the OKeh label. The company was named Otto Heinemann Phonograph Supply Co. In 1920, it was changed to General Phonograph Corporation in 1920, and in the same year, OKeh started producing standard (lateral-cut) records.

We do not know what economic interest Lindström had in General Phonograph Co, but it is very clear that the two companies co-operated closely. A large number of OKeh records were issued by various Lindström branches in Europe, and the General Phonograph Co reciprocated by pressing Lindström recordings in the USA on the OKeh and Odeon labels. Although OKeh’s main strength was in popular music, including the discovery of many major jazz artists, thanks to their Lindström connection they were also quite successful in producing records for the large immigrant market.

Whatever the Lindström-Okeh relationship was at the beginning, the connection was clear when Columbia acquired Lindström in 1926. Columbia's US affiliate immediately acquired Okeh, and it was renamed Okeh Phonograph Co. The matrix exchange continued as before.

Catalogue and matrix series

From the very beginning of the record industry, record companies devised various systems to keep track of their products. They soon discovered that it was not enough to name the first record "1" and the next one "2". We know that the Gramophone Company made about a quarter million records between 1898 and 1925. Lindström must have made at least 100,000. There was a need to reserve different series for different record sizes, price categories, countries, languages and other matters. We are all familiar with the Gramophone Company's ingenuous but eventually unsuccessful method of reserving blocks of numbers to various instruments and regions. The system became too complicated, the numbers reserved for Scandinavian bagpipe players were never used at all, while German male singers had to be extended several times. The system was further complicated when two-sided records were introduced. Different numbers were now required for each side, and an additional number for the two-sided product.

There have been various attempts to chart the Lindström numerical system. The most comprehensive of these can be found in Paul Vernon's book "Ethnic and vernacular records". The Odeon part consists of 18 pages and Parlophone five; in addition, there is also one page listing some Pathé series from the Columbia/Lindström era. Beka is not listed at all, neither is Homocord, nor the various pre-Lindström companies such as Favorite and Lyrophon. Most of us can probably add at least a few series missing from Vernon's list.

A more serious problem is that Vernon has not been able to present the various series in a logical, historical sequence. It is obvious that for Odeon, at least four historical numbering systems are combined here: the early pre-Lindström Odeon system (International Talking Machine Co), which was to some extent continued by Lindström. We have a new system from the 1920s. A third system, which includes the various six-digit A-prefix series, belongs to the late 1920s and 1930s. A fourth system belongs to the period after World War Two.

In addition, there seem to be groups of Odeon series which belong exclusively to certain regional branches, for instance France and South America. Parlophone and the other labels have fewer series (and probably fewer records), but similar problems exist.

In Lindström's case, the system of matrix numbers seems to have been simpler. At least for Odeon, it was mainly based on geographical letter codes, Be for Berlin, Sto for Stockholm, Hf for Helsinki (Helsingfors), Hko for Hong Kong and so on. The same numerical sequence was usually used for various record sizes, but a special letter would indicate the 30 cm size. However, the exact practice is far from clear. Finnish records made in Berlin or Stockholm were still given a Hf matrix number, if the records were intended primarily for the Finnish catalogue. I would suggest that the principal function of the prefix was to indicate the agent or regional branch which had produced the record. Later on, the masters could of course be exchanged among the various branches, a French record could be reissued in a Finnish catalogue series and so on.

In addition, detailed discographical research shows that in real life there were many special cases and exceptions to the general principles. The documentation of Finnish shellac records is 99 % complete, so we can take the Finnish Lindström series as an example. For the principal label, Odeon, there were two main catalogue series, A 228000 for 25 cm discs and AA 210600 for 30, for the period before 1945. But in addition there were several short series, such as a short later Rxx 210650 series of 30 cm discs. This suggests that we need to focus on the main principles of the numerical system, we can probably never cover all the exceptions.

Goals for further research

The Gramophone Company is probably the best documented record company in the world. In addition to Peter Martland's excellent doctoral dissertation on the company's early years, there are numerous popular histories of the company and its successor, EMI. In addition, we have Alan Kelly's monumental series of discographies, partly printed and partly on CD-ROM. The task has, of course, been made easier by the fact that much documentation on the company since 1898 has been preserved at the EMI archives in Hayes, and a large part of the material is also available on microfilm at the British Library.

In Lindström's case, much of the material has been lost, but much also survives – also at the EMI archives, which reveal that the company was already gathering information on the competitor

before the merger. Some of the tasks will be discussed separately during this conference, but in this connection I would like to smaller research project with the aim of reconstructing the Lindström numerical system, starting with the work of Vernon and other researchers. Until a complete Lindström discography is available, a reconstruction of the numerical system would create a framework for a discography, and also clarify the company's organisation.