

THE LINDSTRÖM PROJECT

A cultural history of a German-based multinational record company, 1904-1960

Carl Lindström AG was one of the world's four multinational record companies before the Second World War. In many countries, the Lindström labels (Parlophon, Odeon, Homocord, Beka) were market leaders. Lindström artists ranged from opera singers to Balinese gamelan orchestras. They included conductor Willem Mengelberg, jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong, Finnish pop singer Georg Malmstén and East African folk singer Hadija Binti Abdulla. Between 1904 and 1945, Lindström and associated companies globally produced at least 100,000 titles.

In contrast to contemporary British and US companies (1, the history of Lindström is little known. The company archives were largely destroyed after World War Two. As a result, our view of the history of the recording industry has been one-sided, underestimating the role played by German industry. In May 2008, *Gesellschaft für historische Tonträger* (<http://www.phonomuseum.at/>) initiated a project which aims to document the history of Lindström. The project started with a two-day conference in Immenstadt, Germany, and the proceedings will be published later this year. GHT's Lindström Project eventually aims to produce a complete discography of all records published by the company in an Internet database, plus national surveys of the company's activities.

Carl Lindström AG was founded in 1904 in Berlin to produce gramophones. The founder was the Swedish inventor Carl Elof Lindström (b. Södertälje 1869), but the company was soon taken over by German financiers. Between 1910 and 1913 Lindström purchased a number of established record companies (Beka, Odeon, Favorite etc) with global production and marketing organisations. Between 1913 and 1925, despite setbacks caused by the war, it expanded to North and South America and Australia. In the 1920s, the company had factories in Germany, Austria, Poland, France, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Canada, Argentina, Brazil and Chile, an associated company in the USA (Okeh), and agencies in almost all countries and colonies (see Schulz-Köhn 1940).

In 1925, Lindström was acquired by the Columbia Graphophone Company. In 1931, it became part of EMI, but it continued as a semi-independent company with headquarters in Berlin and its own agencies in most countries. In Finland, for instance, Lindström was presented by Pohjoismainen Sähkö Oy. After World War Two, Lindström's operations were merged into EMI and it finally ceased to exist as a company in the 1960s.

The recording industry is a typical example of culture industries where economies of scale are important. To create an infrastructure of studios and pressing plants, large investments are needed. Once a recording (film etc) has been made, it can be duplicated at low cost per item. Current research has emphasised the role of the “business cultures” of multinational record companies in shaping global musical trends and creating products which can be marketed globally.

Initially the industry played a much more passive role: it attempted to record and sell music which had already established its popularity. A hundred years ago, multinational companies had to produce music for local, frequently quite small markets because there was not (yet) any music with a global appeal. Even in Western classical music, the most global musical tradition, the standard vocal repertoire had to be recorded in many languages. The expensive technology had to be adapted to the production of small runs. In this process, local agents with their knowledge of local and regional tastes played a crucial role.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the industry acquired a more active role. Dance music became more international and records could now be marketed across national and cultural borders. In some cases the industry was able to create “stars” out of performers who had no previous following. Cooperation with radio and sound film became important.

The years between the world wars are the period when the present “media culture” began to take shape, but we do not know how this process happened. Previous histories, such as Jones’ (1985) and Martland’s (1992) studies of EMI, study developments from the viewpoint of the headquarters, and there is little historical information on “production cultures”, the selection of artists and repertoire, and interaction between local agents and the head office. Yet it is these factors which determined what kinds of music were recorded.

The purpose of the Lindström project is to reconstruct the history and corporate structure of Carl Lindström AG in an European perspective, with an emphasis on the period before 1945, and show how the company influenced the recorded repertoire. It is assumed that much of the repertoire retained a local character, but the importance of a trans-national repertoire continued to grow. The project will start with an outline of the global structure of the Lindström concern; proceed to a study of the company’s production culture and case studies on specific genres of recorded music. The individual research tasks are the following

1. A business history of Carl Lindström AG
 - the German parent company
 - mergers with Columbia and EMI
 - local and regional organisation
2. A discography of Lindström
 - a summary of available information, matrix and catalogue series, numerical estimates of release for various local markets
 - a database with all known Lindström 78 rpm issues
3. “Production culture”
 - Berlin management, staff musical directors
 - regional offices and local agents
 - recording practice: studios in Berlin, regional studios, mobile technicians
4. Recorded repertoire: case studies
 - the operatic styles of the Fonotipia, Odeon and Parlophon labels: regional styles, court singers, studio performers
 - ethnic and regional music in America and Europe, Bauernkapellen in Chicago
 - spreading tangos, foxtrots, rumbas in Europe
 - singing film stars, the case of Zarah Leander
 - regional popular music in Sweden, Norway and Finland
 - commercialising Serbian folk music
 - the Okeh 8000 “race series” and black American music in Europe
 - etc
5. Conclusions

After the first conference in Immenstadt (May 2008), researchers from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Norway, Sweden, Finland and XXXX have already agreed to join the Lindström project, each contributing with regional studies. Another team of researchers in Germany, Sweden and Finland is focusing on archival materials still found in the EMI company archives in Germany and UK. At the moment, the Lindström discography already contains data on XXX recordings.

A meeting on “work in progress” will be held in Budapest in December 2008, and the Lindström project will also be the theme of the next GHT conference in Immenstadt, May 2009.

References

Schulz-Köhn. Die Schallplatte auf dem Weltmarkt. 1940.

Jones, "The Gramophone Company: an Anglo-American multinational, 1898-1931", *Business History Review* 59/1, 1985

Martland, A business history of The Gramophone Company Ltd, 1897-1918. Diss., University of Cambridge 1992.