

A MAPLESON AFTERWORD

Further Notes on the Mapleson Cylinder Project
at the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound
New York Public Library

by David Hall - Curator

"Stay tuned for our next thrilling installment!" -- This might well stand as a motto for what has happened with the Mapleson Cylinder Project at the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound since the fall of 1981 when my Preliminary Report was drafted for publication in Vol. XII, No. 3 of the Journal. Until the spring of 1982, when we finally completed--several months past the initial target date--the pitching and organization of the Mapleson program content to the point of having a usable research tape, arranged in essence by opera title and performing order within each work, hardly a week went by without some new bits and pieces of information turning up to help fill in the mosaic that eventually will add up to a reasonably comprehensive history of the Lionel Mapleson cylinders and their place in the early history of the sound recording art.

Without doubt, the most fascinating information breakthrough stemmed from a mid-December visit to the Mapleson Music Library at Lindenhurst, Long Island, where Lionel's son, Alfred J., and grandson, Peter, allowed access to Lionel's diaries and to the family photograph album. As if this were not enough, sixteen additional cylinders came to light, of which five turned out to be items noted by Ira Glackens and George K. Bishop back in 1938 but which William Seltsam had returned to Alfred Mapleson. Thus the number of lost or broken cylinders cited toward the end of my Preliminary Report becomes 19 instead of 24. The sixth cylinder appears on initial hearings to be yet another Jean de Reszke excerpt from the "O noble lame" aria in Le Cid. Only one of the sixteen cylinders bore correct identification; but, with the exception of the last named, could easily be verified from the description in the Glackens-Bishop notebook. The other ten cylinders either were in too poor condition to be either decipherable or usable for research purposes or were Mapleson family vignettes. All that could be put onto tape was recorded; but only the aforementioned six are included on the present research tape available for on-premises listening at the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives. More details anon.

The Lionel Mapleson diaries, which run from his schoolboy years in England to virtually the day of his death in December 1937, yielded both more and less information than expected. Most disappointing was the lack of specifics concerning recordings from the stage of the Metropolitan Opera--there is only a terse observation at the end of the 1900-01 season to the effect that the voices of Melba and Jean de Reszke had been successfully captured: "During this season, have made a fine collection of phonograph cylinders. Melba and Jean de Reszke's voices."

Family affairs loom large in the diaries: Lionel was deeply devoted to his wife, Helen, his children, Louis and Alfred, and to his mother, father and sister Violet, living in London at 65 Bartholomew Road, Highgate. Every summer, save that of 1937, his last, was passed in England, where for a good many of them he also acted as Librarian for the Covent Garden summer opera season. The most revealing information in the Lionel Mapleson diaries is that which tells how he got bitten by the phonograph bug:

Tuesday, March 20, 1900 -- Today, my long cherished desire is satisfied. I purchased an Edison "Home" phonograph for \$30. In the evening, I took it up chez Helen. People there all spent a merry evening with the beautiful instrument.

A ledger entry in the same diary fixes Mapleson's purchase date as March 17, 1900.

Wednesday, March 21 -- Dear old Leo Stern invited me to see his phonograph. His Valse, sung by his wife, Miss Suzanne Adams - perfect. He very kindly presented me with a Bettini recorder and reproducer -- delightful, valuable gift.

It is of more than passing interest to note that 'cellist-composer Leo Stern had been soloist under Antonin Dvorak in London for the world premiere of the Czech master's Cello Concerto.

Thursday, March 22 -- For the present, I neither work properly nor eat nor sleep. I'm a phonograph maniac!! Always making or buying records. The Bettini apparatus is simply perfect. ...

April 28 -- Sailed for Europe by S.S. Statendam, Holland-America Line. ... Managed to get the phonograph outfit and nearly a hundred wax cylinders safely on board together with our numerous belongings.

The above bits of diary information enable us to place more closely the date on which Mapleson persuaded the great Marcella Sembrich to step up to his horn and sing the cadenza sans accompaniment from the Johann Strauss "Voci de primavera" (Voices of Spring) waltz. At the end of the cylinder we hear Lionel announcing singer and title, then the date, 1900, "March thirt..." the last syllable being undecipherable. Since the diary tells us that the phonograph was purchased subsequent to March 13, the Sembrich recording would have to have been done on Friday, March 30, or Saturday, March 31.

Of more considerable importance is the fact that these diary entries demolish the legend that the machine to which Mapleson attached his giant horn for the recording of Met opera performances had been presented to him by Thomas Edison for the published photographs of Mapleson with his recording apparatus show very clearly an Edison "Home" Model A (suitcase type) at the other end of the horn.

Whatever evidence exists of any direct contact between Lionel Mapleson and Thomas Edison either disappeared in the 1914 fire at the Edison works or is buried among the memorabilia at the Mapleson Music Library on Long Island. That Mapleson was presented with a machine by the Edison company--a fine Triumph model--is in fact evidenced by its presence at the Mapleson Music Library but it is not the one shown in the photographs. What seems likely is that when Edison became interested in making grand opera recordings in 1905-06, he or his company representatives did what all the other commercial recording people of the day did; saw to it that certain key people on the Metropolitan Opera staff who could help gain entry to the star singers were supplied with Edison Triumph phonographs. Along with the house physician, among others, Lionel Mapleson probably was a recipient of this largesse. By that time, he had not been recording from the stage for some three years--more on this subject shortly.

How did Mapleson come by his giant recording horn? This is still a mystery in terms of hard evidence but the diaries tell us that Lionel Mapleson was a great gadgeteer, and among other things a photography buff who maintained his own processing facilities in the pre-roll film days when the work was done on fragile glass plates. I see no reason why Mapleson could not have consulted the pages of the several technical journals of the day which published recording horn specifications, copied the data and simply turned the job over to the Met carpenter shop--speculation, I agree, but not beyond the realm of possibility. In any event, the best efforts of Leah Burt at the Edison National Historic Site and of my colleague, Ray Wile, have been to no avail in clearing up the mystery of Edison and Lionel Mapleson.

Yet another addition to Mapleson documentation turned up in the Mapleson family photograph album at Lindenhurst--three hitherto unpublished photos of the Mapleson recording apparatus. Two of them show Lionel inspecting the large horn in one instance, and in the other, inserting a cylinder onto the mandrel. The third shows his statuesquely beautiful wife, Helen, posing in front of the machine. Alfred Mapleson told me that it was she who tripped the shutter, presumably after Alfred had done the camera setup and focus, while he himself wound up the series with a shot of his beloved Helen. Since the original 4" x 5" glass plates for these photographs have long since vanished, Alfred and Peter Mapleson generously made their fading prints available for restoration, which was successfully accomplished and the New York Public Library further enriched thereby. Thus we have an additional three photographs of Mapleson's machine added to the three previously published. The best known are the two initially published by William Seltsam as part of the promotion for his International Record Collectors' Club issued from the Mapleson cylinders (1939-1966)--one of Lionel holding a cylinder in his left hand with right hand to the lips; the other of Lionel about to place a bit of connective tubing between recorder and horn. The first also has been published in Time Magazine and High Fidelity. Least known of the previously published Mapleson photos is that which appeared as part of the April 1938 Hobbies magazine article

by Seltsam's friend and attorney, William D. Whelen, telling of initial plans for disc issues from the cylinders. Mapleson is shown in right-hand profile making to the drive mechanism. Oddly enough, the first publication of this photo was as part of a multiple spread appearing in Musical America for December 6, 1924 as part of an interview with Lionel Mapleson written up by Helen M. Miller. Following the Hobbies magazine publication, no trace has been found either of the negative or original prints processed from it. Seattle collector Keith Moyer first brought to my attention the earlier publication of this photo but could not pinpoint the Musical America issue. Luckily, the 1924 interview had been pasted into the Mapleson family album.

The matter of whether the Mapleson cylinders surviving in this country constitute the "tip of the iceberg" still remains a matter of conjecture; but the April 28, 1900 diary entry cited earlier in this article leads me to place considerable credence in Alfred Mapleson's assertion that as a child, he saw a room in the Bartholomew Road house in London with boxes and boxes of cylinders that Lionel brought over for the enjoyment of his parents and sister. Possibly, this is where the Edison "Home" phonograph ended up since it was not among the Mapleson effects at Lindenhurst. Neither Alfred nor Peter could shed light on this matter.

The whys and how of the Mapleson children, along with father Lionel, turning up in 1909 at the ends of 1901 cylinders of Jean de Reszke, Nellie Melba, et al. is resolved via the Lionel Mapleson diaries. We learn that around 1907, Lionel had built a miniature theater for his young children. Then a diary entry:

Saturday, February 6, 1909 -- History repeats itself. We have the phonograph working again.

It seems clear that this was done for the benefit of Louis, then age 5, and Alfred, age 3, and so the family vignettes continue, according to aural evidence we have detected thus far to as late as 1912.

Why actually did Mapleson cease recording from the Metropolitan Opera stage at the end of the 1902-03 season? I never have been wholly satisfied with the stories that tell of Melba, Gadske, or whoever, nearly getting beamed by things falling from the catwalk forty feet above the stage. In my Preliminary Report, I suggested increasing commercial record company interest in recording of Met opera stars as being a possible factor in management putting its foot down on Mapleson's venturesome doings and then I also realized that following the end of the 1902-03 season, the Met came under new management--the easygoing Maurice Grau being succeeded by the redoubtable Heinrich Conried who undoubtedly ran a tighter ship. A Wagnerian specialist colleague at R&H then reminded me that Conried had undertaken reconstruction of the Met backstage area in preparation for the forthcoming American premiere of Parsifal (over the protests from Bayreuth). So this might have been the coup de grace for Mapleson's location recording work. Here it

should be noted that the Mapleson cylinder collection at R&H includes a half-dozen or orchestral repertoire; and a check of the Metropolitan Opera programs of the day point to their having been done from Sunday night concerts early in 1904. The rest, for the present, is silence. Of the cylinders reported to have been taken by Lionel to his parents' house in England, not a trace has been found. Violet Mapleson was the last of the surviving Mapleson clan in England and nothing is known for sure of what happened to the effects of the Bartholomew Road house following her death after World War II. In any event, Lionel seems to have lost interest in the phonograph until he could revive it as an entertainment vehicle for his young children in 1909.

We come finally to the contents of the "newly discovered" cylinders at the Mapleson Music Library which Alfred and Peter Mapleson generously allowed to be integrated into the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives research tape. They may be listed informally as follows:

Aida - last 36 bars of Act II with Homer, Emilio de Marchi, Campanari, and chorus with Luigi Mancinelli conducting--from the performance of January 31, 1903. Cylinder was in container noting a Gotterdammerung performance with Milka Ternina as Brunnhilde and Jean de Reszke as Siegfried (!).

Le Cid - "O noble lame"--latter part of the aria until just before the organ entrance. Conjectural casting suggests Jean de Reszke as Roderigo, which would place the performance date as January 16, January 19, or February 8, 1901. Container is that which originally contained the Melba Mad Scene from Lucia from March 18, 1901.

Aida - Triumphant Scene excerpt up to the point of Radames' entrance. Chorus only, Luigi Mancinelli conducting from performance of January 31, 1903.

Carmen - Habanera "B" section. Calve with chorus from 1902, date undetermined. Very weak sound, Calve barely audible, chorus more distinct, but everything very distant through a roar of surface noise.

Lohengrin - Chorus following King's Prayer, Alfred Hertz conducting. It seemed reasonable at first to place this as part of the extensive Mapleson documentation of the February 7, 1903 performance with Robert Blass as the King, save that a difference of 7 rpm in speed from the other cylinders from this performance and difference in some aspects of sound quality (not as good as the others) may denote a different performance. More study is needed here.

Pagliacci - Bell Chorus. A slip in Mapleson's handwriting dates this as February 7, 1903.

In general, the surface quality of these cylinders was distinctly poorer than those encountered in most of the others. There were tempting moments, barely audible for three or four seconds at a time on a few of the other Mapleson Music Library cylinders: a tiny bit of the Jean de Teszke-Milka Ternina Tristan duet, a breath of Alfredo in Traviata, but nothing salvageable.

So much for the finds from the Mapleson Music Library. Other points in the Mapleson cylinder saga were illuminated in the course of visits from Ira Glackens, who filled us in on many details on the auditioning and inventory of the cylinders delivered to William Seltsam by Alfred Mapleson early in 1938. This work was done in the Gramercy Park New York home of Glackens' mother on a very small and inadequate machine. From Glendon R. Good who, with George Laviolette, was one of Seltsam's two legatees came the original of the letter from Geraldine Farrar to Seltsam giving him entree to Lionel Mapleson in 1937. It read in part: "I regret I do not know Col. Mapleson's son... but the librarian of the Met, Mr. Lionel Mapleson (who may or may not be a relative) knows everybody of note in the last decades, and he might be able to help you? You could write him at the Met about December 15th (the opera opens the 21st) and here's a card that might help. I hope you obtain results -- for recordings of the Golden Era indeed! Sincerely, Geraldine Farrar"

Last but far from least, came a letter from Aida Favia-Artsay telling of her purchase from Harold Bretnall of the ten Mapleson cylinders, nine of which were issued on the Henry Herrold LP in 1959, thus indicating that these came from the same source as the New York Public Library's 1939 series.

We hope in the final installment of these particular "Mapleson Memoirs" to be able to provide a full and detailed listing of 139 decipherable items taped at the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives from the Mapleson cylinders, with as much information about musical content, performers, dates, and original recording speeds as we have been able to ferret out. We also shall attempt to offer more technical detail concerning pitching and quality problems than has been the case thus far. Since final pitching and organization was completed only in the late spring of 1982, we are hesitant to hazard firm conclusions regarding certain items without an ample opportunity for extended study of the research tape and product.