



Enrico Caruso (Collection: William R. Moran)

Caruso's First Recordings: Myth and Reality

Until quite recent times, many historians and writers approached problems relating to specific episodes in the recording industry's pioneering period solely through the medium of surviving writings, recollections and memoirs of those contemporaries (important and otherwise) who chose to leave accounts. This article examines one such episode - Caruso's first recording session in 1902 for The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd. In the article, previously published and unpublished material is presented and assessed. Specifically, in the light of fresh evidence recently located in the EMI Music Archive, the role of the recording engineer F. W. Gaisberg is re-appraised. Finally, in view of this assessment, the circumstances surrounding this important event are reviewed, as a result of this review both the famous recording engineer and The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd are placed in a fresh perspective.

One of the major problems faced by historians who write about the recording industry, is the apparent lack of corroborated primary sources. Evidence from such sources is essential if the formation of the early industry is to be understood. One result of this dearth of primary source material has been an overreliance on the anecdotal evidence found in the writings and memoirs of pioneers. These sometimes shaky recollections, often written decades after the events they describe, provide at best highly colourful and partisan accounts of the industry's early years. In the normal course of events, original research by scholars would have replaced these works, or at least placed them in a fresh perspective. Over the past decade, the writings of historians such as Professor Raymond Wile, whose research has revealed a remarkable array of previously unpublished data, has graced the pages of the *ARSC Journal*. Unfortunately, there have also been instances when historians and writers have uncritically re-used the anecdotes contained in pioneers' narratives, without apparently any reassessment of the evidence. This article re-examines an important example of this problem. It also seeks to demonstrate that — even after the passage of ninety or more years — it is possible to locate fresh primary sources, and to use those sources as evidence in re-interpreting one of the recording industry's most famous anecdotes.

Using previously unpublished sources from the EMI Music Archive in London,¹ this article examines the events surrounding the April 1902 recordings made of the Italian tenor Enrico Caruso (1873-1921) by the recording engineer Fred Gaisberg (1873-1951) for The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd. The importance of these 1902 records lies in the fact that they were Caruso's earliest essays in the medium that

later he — more than anyone else — transformed into a new art form.² Furthermore, the very circumstances in which they were made have generated a series of largely apocryphal stories that with re-telling have grown and become an accepted part of the history of sound recording. In addition to EMI's archival resources, Fred Gaisberg's own published accounts (written forty or more years after the event) are re-evaluated in order that the whole episode can be placed in a fresh perspective.

The story of the April 1902 Caruso recordings has been told many times over the years. In its most recent incarnation, it was outlined by David Bicknell (1906-1988), himself a distinguished former Head of EMI's International Artists Department, who in the late-1920s had been trained by Gaisberg. During the course of a 1988 BBC Television interview, Bicknell said:

By 1902, he'd [Gaisberg] found Caruso in Milan. [He] was enormously impressed. He went to record another famous tenor called Bonci and telegraphed back home [to London] for permission to record Caruso and not Bonci. Well, nobody had heard of Caruso, so they told him to go ahead and do what he had been sent to do. But, he heard a second performance at La Scala and more than ever impressed engaged Caruso on his own, paid him one hundred pounds in gold sovereigns for ten songs, which he did in one afternoon, I think. [Gaisberg] came back [to London] and they found they'd got of course a world famous voice. Nothing did so much to put the gramophone on the map as Caruso.³

In this telling, David Bicknell included all the essential points of the story, but he omitted to mention one detail. That was the sending of a telegram to Gaisberg by the London Head Office saying: "Fee exorbitant forbid you to record."⁴ In essence, Bicknell's account of the Caruso 1902 recordings is one in which a heroic Gaisberg successfully executes a triumph of individualism and experience over the dead hand of company bureaucracy. It is an extraordinary story of a remarkable coup, but alas a story with little basis in fact.

Before turning to the evidence surrounding this episode, a number of factors need to be described. These include the 1902 structure and organization of The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd, the stage that Enrico Caruso's career had reached at the time of his first recording session, and finally, an understanding of the recording engineer Fred Gaisberg. The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd had been formed in 1900 as a British registered business, with its headquarters in London.⁵ By 1902, the Company, the successor in business to earlier enterprises, had created extensive branch and supply networks in gramophone goods throughout Europe, Russia, the British Empire and beyond. To supply this network, the Company purchased gramophones in the United States, and to meet the constantly changing needs of local markets, it employed recording engineers to tour the Company's vast territory making records of the latest popular works. In 1902, all The Gramophone and Typewriter's records were manufactured at the Company's factory in Hannover, Germany. As with any large multinational business, The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd had developed its own internal structure and hierarchy. At its simplest, this structure was based on the principle that the largely non-executive Board of Directors made policy and dealt with matters of strategic importance, whilst professional managers organized the manufacture and sale of its products. Amongst the management's duties was the negotiation and signing of artists contracts, and where appropriate the payment of royalty fees. With regard to the latter point, the management reported to the Board only significant

long-term contractual agreements. It is significant that The Gramophone and Typewriter's Board Minutes contain no references to Caruso's 1902 contract. Furthermore, at a time before today's instant communications, The Gramophone and Typewriter's team of overseas branch managers exercised almost plenipotentiary powers in the running of their branches, subject to limited oversight from the London-based Managing Director, bi-annual audits, and other control mechanisms.

In 1899, the British company formed The Gramophone Company (Italy) Ltd to exploit the Italian market. This wholly owned sub-company existed for ten years, being finally wound up in 1909 after losing a major Italian court battle concerning copyright. The manner of the Company's end, resulted in the wholesale destruction of its business papers. This fact is important, as it explains why the three recording contracts Caruso had with The Gramophone Company (Italy) Ltd do not survive amongst the EMI Legal papers, the Italian papers, or in the Caruso Artist file. However, what has survived are significant quantities of letters and telegrams to and from the London Head Office.

When the Italian company was formed, the territory was divided between two brothers, Alfred and William Michaelis. Alfred Michaelis, based in Milan, had the twin responsibilities of marketing the Company's products, and identifying and engaging potential recording talent among opera singers and other artists appearing in Milan during the season. Michaelis negotiated fees and contracts, and, in conjunction with the timetables of London-based recording engineers, arranged recording sessions with the artists. According to surviving documents in the EMI Music Archive, this responsibility for arranging recording sessions was among the most important and difficult of Michaelis's duties.⁶ Bearing all of this in mind, the idea of Fred Gaisberg with a bag of gold wandering over Europe as a free-lance recording engineer, doubling up as a talent scout or impresario, recording anyone he felt would make a good recording artist, becomes somewhat absurd. By 1902, he and all the other engineers employed by The Gramophone and Typewriter, worked to predetermined schedules agreed and arranged between London and the branch managers.

When Enrico Caruso made his recording debut in April 1902, he had already established himself as a rising star, singing leading operatic roles at La Scala, Milan, and in opera houses throughout Italy. He had also commenced his international career, having undertaken tours to South America, Egypt and Russia. Furthermore, he held a contract to sing at Covent Garden in London later the same year. His repertoire was extensive, and he evidently had the respect and admiration of composers such as Puccini and Giordano. In addition, by 1902, Caruso had sung in leading roles with many celebrated musicians, including Tetrizzini, Chaliapine and Toscanini. Thus, he was not a young undiscovered singer, but an established performer on the threshold of a unique international career. In 1902, The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd needed Caruso as much as he needed them.⁷

By far the most important player in this story is the recording engineer Fred Gaisberg. Gaisberg was clearly fascinating, wholly exceptional and multi-talented. Unfortunately, his own memoirs and a subsequent biography fail to capture the brilliance of the man whose career spanned the earliest days of the industry to the coming of the long playing record.⁸ Gaisberg was born and educated in Washington, D.C., U.S.A. A gifted though largely untrained musician, he first entered the infant sound recording business in 1889, when — as a teenager — he gained employment as an accompanist with the Washington-based Columbia Company. The young Gaisberg initially acquired skills as a sound engineer under the tutelage of the graphophone's

inventor Charles Sumner Tainter, and later with American Graphophone's chief engineer Thomas H. MacDonald. In 1894, Gaisberg began to work at the Washington laboratory of the gramophone's inventor Emile Berliner. There he learned the art of cutting sound records onto disks using the Berliner process. In 1898, Berliner sent him to London to create The Gramophone Company's first recording studio. In the following decade, Gaisberg was one of a number of sound engineers whose recordings opened up European, Russian, Indian and Oriental gramophone markets. He also participated in the recording program which turned the gramophone from an instrument of popular entertainment into a medium of high culture — the so-called celebrity recordings. Fred Gaisberg was also a great survivor. He outlived the changeover to electrical recording in 1925 (which ended his career as an engineer), to become Artistic Director of HMV's (and later EMI's) International Artists Department. Although he retired in 1939, he remained in touch with the industry until his death in 1951. His proudest achievement was the list of stellar names he recorded, at the top of which was the name Enrico Caruso.

The legends and myths concerning Caruso's 1902 recordings appear to date from the 1942 American publication of Fred Gaisberg's own memoirs *The Music Goes Round*⁹ (published in Britain in 1946 as *Music on Record*). Forty years after the event,¹⁰ aided solely by memory and diaries,¹¹ and (due to wartime restrictions) with no access to the Company's own papers, Gaisberg set out his recollections of the events that led to the making of the famous 11 April 1902 records. He wrote "In March 1902 ... I found myself in Italy for the purpose of recording a conventional programme of Italian opera, ballads, comics and bands."¹² He continued:

*Our local representative was Alfred Michaelis, a man of enterprise and vision. He lost no time in telling us that two tenors were creating a furore at the Scala, and that we must record them both, or at least one of them. Their names were Enrico Caruso and Alessandro Bonci. Our first attempt to hear Caruso was not a success. It happened this way: our then General Manager [Managing Director] William Barry Owen, and his wife chanced to pass through Milan just as we arrived and Alfred Michaelis had arranged a box party at the Scala. The programme was "Germania" an opera by Alberto Franchetti with text by Luigi Illica, first produced at the Scala on March 11, 1902 ... The cast included Caruso, Sammarco and Pinta. The house was sold out and to obtain a box Michaelis had to bribe certain powers ...*¹³

Gaisberg then related how the owner of the box arrived and unceremoniously expelled the party. However, the party later witnessed the second performance of *Germania*. Of this performance, Gaisberg recalled:

I cannot describe my transports or the wild enthusiasm of the audience when Federico Loewe (Caruso) urged the students to revolt against the invader, Napoleon — "Studenti Udite!"

Is it any wonder that I lost my head? I turned to Michaelis and said, "Find out what fee he will accept for ten songs." The next day Maestro Cottone, our accompanist, returned with a proposition. Caruso would sing ten songs for £100, all to be recorded in one afternoon. (In reality this was the only free period he could squeeze into the busy season.) To us all in those days, these were really staggering terms, but I transmitted them to London with a strong recommendation, feeling all the time how inadequate were words in telegraphic form to describe the merits of the case. A cabled reply came back quickly: "Fee exorbitant, forbid you to record."

*This was humiliating and I felt it was hopeless to argue with the people in London, as it was only by being on the spot that one could grasp the urgency of the opportunity. I therefore gave the word to Michaelis to go ahead.*¹⁴

Fred Gaisberg retold the same story in the January 1944 edition of *The Gramophone*.¹⁵ The article was both extensive and detailed, but at times it varied significantly from his earlier account. He noted "...we arrived also for the Carnival Season with a complete recording outfit which we set up in a big private drawing room on the third floor of the Hotel Milan."¹⁶ He adds that Michaelis had already identified: "...four young tenors of great promise: Caruso, Alessandro Bonci, Alsemi and the older Fernando de Lucia,"¹⁷ Gaisberg continued:

*To give us a chance to hear some of these singers Michaelis secured a box at La Scala for the first performance of "Germania."*¹⁸ *The guests included besides my brother Will and myself, our London director, his wife, Mr. and Mrs. William Barry Owen, and the Paris director Mr. Alfred Clark and his wife.*¹⁹

In this account, Owen and his wife were joined in the box by Alfred Clark and his then wife. Once again, Gaisberg related how bribery had been used to secure the box at the Opera House and how the box's owner unexpectedly appeared to watch the performance, and had all the visitors unceremoniously thrown out. He went on to say:

*Eventually we all saw the second performance of "Germania" and heard Caruso. Escorted by his own manager Cottone, we went back stage and talked terms with Caruso ... Actually once terms were fixed the greatest difficulty was to steal a few hours in the tenor's busy programme. Now we had to submit the terms by wire to London (£100 for ten songs) which was promptly rejected. This did not daunt us and a few days later Caruso ... entered the Hotel Milan.*²⁰

Both these accounts provide a great deal of information. Gaisberg was not alone when he heard Caruso sing *Germania* for the second time. For, not only were Alfred Michaelis and Gaisberg's brother William present, but also two of the Company's most important executives, William Barry Owen, the Managing Director, and Alfred Clark, the manager of the then semi-independent French branch. Curiously, although Directors with executive powers were on hand, Gaisberg introduces the idea that, because of the fee, London somehow became involved and refused him permission to make the records. The problem with this is who in London could he possibly have been cabling for permission? In 1974, the story was told once more by Gaisberg's biographer Jerrold Northrop Moore in his work, *A Voice in Time*.²¹ Moore, who during the research for this book had access to Gaisberg's diaries, wrote an uncritical and accepting account, merely retelling Gaisberg's version of events.

If Fred Gaisberg's two accounts are to be accepted, it has to be assumed that the Managing Director William Barry Owen — who had heard Caruso perform — and who would therefore have been aware of his worth, had returned to London, and on account of the cost, refused to countenance recording Caruso. One other problem presents itself, in both accounts, Gaisberg suggests that he and Michaelis negotiated with Caruso on the spur of the moment, after hearing the performance of *Germania* and that the recordings were taken within a few days. However, according to Kaufman, the opera's premier was 11 March, 1902, yet Caruso did not make his first records until a full month later.²² Evidently, negotiations did take place, possibly in Caruso's dressing

room after a performance (the person who did the negotiating is further confused by the figure of Cottone, variously described as “our accompanist” and “Caruso’s manager”), but the idea that both the decision and the negotiations took place on the spur of the moment is clearly incorrect. In any case, during the month between the premier of *Germania* and the making of the Caruso recordings, Gaisberg was in Rome making his equally famous Sistine Chapel choir recordings, including those of the castrato Alessandro Moreschi (1858-1922).²³

Fred Gaisberg’s two accounts just do not add up. In saying that, one must not fall into the trap of believing that Gaisberg was trying to mislead his readers. Rather than a deception, this needs to be seen as a classic example of too much reliance being placed on recollection by one person without independent supporting evidence. Gaisberg was writing forty years after the event. Apart from himself there were no witnesses of the events still alive. He was writing in the depths of the second World War, because of which he had no access to relevant EMI documents. Furthermore, as none of the documents in the EMI Caruso file were written by Gaisberg, it is quite possible that he did not even know that they existed. Also, at seventy years of age, he could simply have made some errors of memory. Finally, he could not possibly have known just how seriously his recollections would subsequently be taken.

After examining and placing Gaisberg’s own evidence in perspective, the new and previously untested evidence can be revealed and assessed. This evidence has been gleaned from the surviving business records of The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd, at the EMI Music Archive in London. Among these papers are those relating to Enrico Caruso’s 1902 recordings. They take the form of letters and telegrams sent from Italy by the Branch Manager Alfred Michaelis. This fact alone makes Alfred Michaelis a figure worthy of additional scrutiny. Alfred and his brother were evidently experienced Jewish merchants. Some evidence suggests that they were cousins of Emile Berliner, inventor of the gramophone.²⁴ Alfred Michaelis had apparently died some time before Gaisberg’s 1940s accounts of the 1902 recordings. Nonetheless, Gaisberg spoke generously of him as: “...a cultured and far-sighted man who taught us youngsters a lot about the finer side of life.”²⁵

The earliest document in the EMI’s current Caruso artist file is an April 10, 1902 telegram from Alfred Michaelis to the London office of The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd: “Please cable 300 pounds Caruso Pinto Zurich Gaisberg reply Tamagno tomorrow.”²⁶ The telegram was followed up by a letter of the same date from Alfred Michaelis to William Barry Owen.

Dear Sir,

I duly received your letter of 3rd inst.

Caruso sings tomorrow 10 songs for L.100. Pinto, the soprano you heard in “Germania”, sings 10 for L.40.

Gaisberg also requires L.60. and I also want money for the Zurich records...

I confirm my telegram:

“Please cable 300 pounds Caruso Pinto Zurich Gaisberg reply Tamagno tomorrow” and have also received your telegram:

“Do not understand Gaisberg’s telegram wire explanation.”

On enquiry learned that Gaisberg has telegraphed Miss Griffen [sic]²⁷ to make no more ship-

ments to Milan, as we are leaving for Zurich on Sunday; and that he has also written to her giving full details.

I have consequently wired the following:

"For Gaisbergs [sic] telegram refer letter addressed Miss Griffen [sic] confirm my telegram cable 300 pounds Milan."

Yours very truly

Alfred Michaelis.²⁸

This important letter provides key evidence to the order of events. It confirms that Owen did hear Caruso sing in *Germania* (the soprano singing the role of Ricke in *Germania* was Amelia Pinto. She had the slot before Caruso during the April 11, 1902 recording session). It proves that the request for money to pay the artist came from Michaelis as Branch Manager, and not Gaisberg. The letter reveals that the request for funds was made to the Managing Director in the manner of everyday business. In the letter, Michaelis made no attempt to convince Head Office of the need to stand such an expenditure. That said, the letter does contain a clue that could explain Gaisberg's subsequent recollection of events. Michaelis cites Owen's telegram: "Do not understand Gaisberg's telegram wire explanation." Crucially, there is no evidence to support the existence of the famous "Forbid you to record" telegram, nor has any such telegram survived in the EMI Music Archive. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that no such telegram was ever sent. Miss Griffin, as a clerk at the recording laboratory in London was concerned with recording arrangements (the dispatching of waxes etc.) and not contractual arrangements. In addition, she had insufficient status to send such a message. Most importantly, as the letter to Owen clearly indicates, the figure dealing with the financial side of the operation was Alfred Michaelis rather than Gaisberg.

On April 11, 1902, Michaelis sent a second telegram: "Require money pay singers tomorrow Saturday. Michaelis."²⁹ Two days later — by way of confirmation — he wrote a second and equally important letter to Owen:

Dear Sir,

I confirm my telegram of 11th inst:

"Require [money] pay singers tomorrow Saturday."

Also telegram of 12th in answer to yours of 11th inst:

"[Thomas] Cook has not received order enquire Wire to whom payable."

This last was sent off during my absence from the office.

We received from [Thomas] Cook in good time Lire 7695 for payment of artists. We have taken some excellent records of Caruso — I think they will be a decided success.³⁰

This second letter revealed that the money was sent via the travel agent and banker Thomas Cook Ltd, and the singers were paid with Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd funds from London. No question of Gaisberg guaranteeing the funds himself, and no question of the recordings taking place against the Company's wishes. The decision to make the records was clearly made by the two executives without reference either to Gaisberg or The Gramophone and Typewriter's London Board.

This new evidence effectively challenges Gaisberg's anecdotal accounts of the events surrounding the April 11, 1902 Caruso recordings. After more than ninety

years, the record has been put straight. Caruso's first recording session was a planned and considered exercise. The decision to undertake the project was endorsed at the highest levels of management — William Barry Owen the Managing Director of the Company himself, and Alfred Michaelis the Italian Branch Manager. However, notwithstanding this new interpretation of the events surrounding the April 1902 Caruso recordings, Gaisberg's other observations regarding events are clearly not invalidated. Nor does this new view detract from the great recording engineer's achievement — understandably one in which he took most pride — that of being the first man to record the greatest tenor of the twentieth century, Enrico Caruso.

Caruso, Gaisberg, Michaelis and Owen all played a part in the 1902 Caruso enterprise. However, as this article demonstrates it was a team rather than an individual effort. That said, to be censorious of Gaisberg would be small-minded. If after forty years, the sole survivor of that quartet got his facts a little muddled, and if in the process he exaggerated the importance of his own role, then at most he reveals himself as being but human. It is after all the duty of historians to collect the available data and unravel these matters. Rather than reproach Gaisberg, perhaps it would perhaps be proper to censure those who for fifty years uncritically accepted his interpretation of events. Even after clearing away the myths and legends, the centrality of Gaisberg's role in the April 1902 Caruso recordings remains. As he himself wrote with great pride forty years after the event: "I recorded him first and that when he was on the threshold of a world career."³¹ To Gaisberg go the laurels of being the first to record Caruso, and to recognise on hearing that now forgotten opera *Germania* that here might be the voice of the century.

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Endnotes:

1. I would like to thank Mrs. Ruth Edge, the Archivist at the EMI Music Archive, London, for her kindness and help in the preparation of this article, and for giving me access to The Caruso Artist File and other contemporary documents and papers.
2. Thanks to the work of Dr. John Bolig, the April 11, 1902 Gramophone and Typewriter recordings are now recognised as the first Caruso recordings. In this work, I have used the dating in his discography as it appears in Scott M, *The Great Caruso* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988).
3. Interview David Bicknell, "Memories of a Musical Dog" *Omnibus*, BBC Television, 1988.
4. For a recent account of the story citing the "Forbid you record" telegram see, Caruso (Jr) E and Farkas A, *Enrico Caruso* (Portland: Amadeus, 1990): p.358.
5. For a fuller examination of the formation, organization, structure and personalities within The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd, see: Martland SP, "A Business History of The Gramophone Company Ltd, 1897-1918" (unpublished PhD Thesis, University

- of Cambridge, 1992).
6. See Italian Branch files 1902-1904, EMI.
7. For an interpretation of Caruso's career prior to 1902 see Scott M, *The Great Caruso* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988). This work contains an appendix by Thomas G. Kaufman which chronicles all Caruso's performances. This remarkable study enables Caruso's movements to be tracked during the crucial weeks before his April 11, 1902 recording session. See also similar accounts in Caruso Jr and Farkas, *Enrico Caruso*.
8. See Gaisberg FW, *Music on Record* (London: Robert Hale, 1946), and Moore JN, *A Voice in Time* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974).
9. Gaisberg FW. *The Music Goes Round* (New York: Macmillan, 1942).
10. Although Fred Gaisberg published his own version of events in 1942, his brother William C. Gaisberg (1877-1918) had published an earlier account in 1917. Curiously, in this short article, none of the difficulties subsequently referred to by his brother are mentioned. See Gaisberg WC, "Great artists who have recorded for His Master's Voice — Caruso," *The Voice*, 1917;1:16.
11. Gaisberg's diaries have survived. However, they have — at some point in the last twenty years — passed out of the control of Gaisberg's legatees. Alas, they are not presently available to researchers, and have therefore not been consulted in the preparation of this article.
12. Gaisberg, pp.50-51, *Music on Record*.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Gaisberg FW. "Notes from my Diary: Enrico Caruso," *The Gramophone*, 1944;21(1):117-119.
16. Ibid. On p.51 *Music On Record*, Gaisberg states that he stayed at Spatz's Hotel in Milan.
17. Ibid.
18. According to Kaufman's "Chronology of Caruso's Appearances," the first performance of *Germania* took place on March 11, 1902.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Moore, pp.67-69, *A Voice in Time*.
22. See Kaufman.
23. For details of Gaisberg's movements during this period see Moore p.69, *A Voice in Time*.
24. Information given to the author in 1990, by the late Robert Sanders (Emile Berliner's grandson).
25. Gaisberg "Notes From My Diary" *The Gramophone*, p.118
26. Alfred Michaelis to Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd, April 10, 1902, (Caruso Artist File, EMI).
27. At the time, Miss Griffin was employed as a clerk in the London Recording Laboratory.
28. Alfred Michaelis to William Barry Owen, April 10, 1902, (Caruso Artist File, EMI).
29. Michaelis to Owen, April 11, 1902, (Caruso Artist File, EMI).
30. Michaelis to Owen, April 13, 1902, (Caruso Artist File, EMI).
31. Gaisberg, "Notes from my Diary", *The Gramophone*, p.118.