RECORD INDUSTRY AND EGYPTIAN TRADITIONAL MUSIC: 1904-1932

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In 1906 John Philip Sousa signalled alarm over the epidemic popularity of the phonograph in America. In “The Menace of Mechanical Music,” he wrote:

Sweeping across the country with the speed of a transient fashion in slang or Panama hats, political war cries or popular novels, comes now the mechanical device to sing for us a song or play for us a piano, in substitute for human skill, intelligence, and soul.1

This widespread acceptance of recorded music was not an exclusively western phenomenon. The phonograph, which emerged essentially as a western scientific invention, became fashionable in a very short time all over the world.

Around the turn of the twentieth century people in Turkey, the Near East, and North Africa seemed as anxious as people in Europe and the United States to have their music recorded. They were actually able to hear the voices of their favorite celebrities on commercial records shortly after Europe and America had access to recordings by Chaliapin, Caruso, and Melba during the early 1900s.

THE PHONOGRAPH GOES TO EGYPT

After the invention of the phonograph in 1877 sporadic mention of sound recording was made in books and journals of the Arabic-speaking world. Al-Muqtataf, a scientifically-oriented journal published in Cairo, made a few references to the phonograph during that time in order to satisfy the curiosity of its readers. In 1880 the journal poked fun at Edison’s invention by saying: “...we will not acknowledge the existence of the talking machine until we see it and hear it,”2 (Al-Muqtataf 1880, V:23) but ten years later this same journal announced that Middle Easterners could order their own phonographs directly from J. Griffin and Sons in London (Al-Muqtataf 1890, IX:693). We are told that in the spring of 1890 Dr. Daniel Bliss, president of what is known today as the American University of Beirut, startled his students with a breathtaking demonstration on his new recording machine (Al-Ḥawrānī 1940:9). Later, in a chapter on the properties of sound that introduced his book on Middle Eastern music, Kāmil al-Khulaṭ included a lucid description of Edison’s manually-cranked tin-foil phonograph (al-Khulaṭ c1904:23). Al-
though this Egyptian musician and theorist belittled the musical utility of this crude contraption, he did depict it as a most admirable scientific novelty.

From these descriptions we should not surmise that the phonograph was fully introduced to the general Middle Eastern public before the twentieth century, since in Europe it took the phonograph at least a decade to develop into a practical household item. Around 1887, after cylinders were made from wax, phonographs were manufactured basically as expensive office dictating equipment. Cheap spring-equipped phonographs suitable for home use were introduced later on in 1894 by Columbia and in 1896 by Edison (Gelatt 1954:69).

We may wonder exactly what kind of recordings Middle Eastern phonograph owners actually listened to around the turn of the century. Although a matter of conjecture, the early phonograph was popular partly because it enabled amateur and professional musicians alike to record, reproduce, and erase instantaneously at home. This meant that phonograph owners must have listened to their own recordings. It is probable, however, that commercially-recorded cylinders of Arabic, Turkish, and perhaps European music gradually became accessible to Middle Easterners around the turn of the century, since we know that in the Western world commercially-recorded cylinders became available after 1890 (Gelatt 1954:33). At least a handful of top Egyptian singers are known to have recorded at this time. One of them was the late nineteenth century prolific singer 'Abdū al-Ḥamūlī (1841-1901), who is known to have made a number of cylinder recordings towards the end of his life (Al-Khulaṭ 1904:145). How commercial or how widely distributed these recordings were is not known.

Widescale commercial recording in Cairo on both cylinders and discs began in the early 20th century. This development was most eloquently illustrated by the appearance of columns in Cairo newspapers advertising records and recording machines. During 1904 Silwājīn, a watchmaking shop in Cairo, was advertising stocks of "genuine American Columbia phonographs," some of which the advertisement said were already sold in retail to customers and wholesale to other watchmaking shops (Al-Mu'āyyid, July 7, 1904:6). Silwājīn's notice also advertised recordings by the "best singers," but did not specify the kind of records it had for sale. We may assume however, that all or most of all were in cylinder form.3

In 1905 Cairo newspaper ads were heralding a significant invention—the flat disc. These ads made a distinction between phonographs of "the old and the new type," as well as between cylinder and disc recordings. Although the 1905 mention seems to be the first, it is likely that disc phonographs reached Cairo before that time. In Europe and America this invention was fashionable soon after 1900. The flat disc was invented as early as 1887 by Emile Berliner, a German immigrant living in the United States, who by 1894 began
to manufacture a disc-playing machine which he named “the gramophone” (Ober 1973:38). Discs, which were not meant for home recording, proved to have more advantages than the cylinder, for not only did they take less storage space, but more important, they were easier to duplicate by the hundreds from the same stamper (Kreuger 1967:258).

In Egypt the flat disc was received favourably. In October 1905, a newspaper ad by Silwâijian (Miṣr, No. 2904, Oct. 3, 1905:n.p.) began by announcing that the shop had acquired from American factories “genuine phonographs of the latest round model” and that “each phonograph, supplemented with five platters (discs) cost only two hundred piasters with a five-year guarantee.” The ad also mentioned that in addition to phonographs of all kinds, the shop had a stock of platters recorded by the most famous singers of Egypt, in addition to a few discs of Turkish music.

In the following year, an ad by the same shop was expanded to the size of a long newspaper column (Al-Muʿāyyad Oct. 8, 1906:7). Moreover, the previous drawing of the cylinder phonograph on the top was replaced by that of a disc phonograph. The ad promoted Arabic, Turkish, and European discs, and recordings by top Egyptian singers, some specified by name. In September, 1907, Fransîs Shop and its branch, both in Cairo, advertised their shop as “the greatest in Egypt for selling platter-type phonographs and platters by famous Egyptian singers,” specifying seven of them by name (Al-Muʿāyyad Sept. 2, 1907:6). In that year the National Odeon Store in Cairo ran an elaborate ad (Al-Muʿāyyad Sept. 11, 1907:7), topped by the name of the store and that of Jack Zâkî Sîdâkah (presumably its owner), announcing that for only 300 piasters it offered “excellent American-made phonographs,” each accompanied by five double-sided discs, with a three-year guarantee. (The double-sided disc was another significant innovation introduced by Odeon in Germany in 1904). Unlike the others, this announcement specified the categories of material that was offered on the discs, namely, comedy, military band music, bashārif (sing. bashraf, or pašèv, an instrumental genre), qašāʿid (sing. qašîdah, a vocal genre), and others. It referred to about a dozen well-known performers by name, preceded by courteous titles of respect familiar to all Arabic speakers, as if the ad were a confirmation of the full respectability and grandeur of the performers now appearing as recording artists.

The scarcity of first-hand information makes it difficult to determine precisely the beginning of Egyptian phonograph era. Available miscellaneous data point to the year 1904 as an approximate beginning. The unprecedented appearance of newspaper advertising of records in 1904 and the growth of this phenomenon thereafter supplies convincing evidence. This phenomenon had an unmistakable ethnomusicological implication; it signified the gradual transformation of the phonograph from a curious toy into a serious musical mass medium that involved the performer, the audience, and the businessman. It
evidenced a significant change in musical life represented by the emergence of the recording artist and by a musical market sustained by a record-consuming audience.

**CYLINDER VERSUS DISC**

Since the phonograph era in Egypt was inaugurated by the use of both cylinder and disc, it is important to indicate the historical and musical relationships between the two types of recordings. Around 1904, when a system for duplicating cylinders had already been perfected in Europe, in Cairo cylinders played a commercial role similar in nature, though not in magnitude, to that of the disc. Cylinders covering a conglomeration of music types were sold at a number of stores. This fact is attested to by labels and tags that still appear on cylinder cardboard containers extant in Egyptian collections. One such label pasted on a box-lid read: “Cylindres Artistiques; Spécialité d’Orchestres Militaires,” (in print) and “Marche Khédíviale, No. 8165” (in ink handwriting) (Fig. 9). Another label that advertised more than one musical genre by name read:

Qaraqāsh Brothers in Cairo and Alexandria: These cylinders are a recent invention; they contain the voices of famous singers and musicians. They have on them new adwaḏr (sing. dawr, a vocal genre) and Arabic and Turkish bashārif . . . 6

Moreover, there is no reason to assume that the cylinder business in Cairo (including the selling of commercially-recorded cylinders) was halted completely after the disc began to gain momentum. Newspaper ads between 1905 and 1908 mentioned both cylinders and discs. In Europe and America, too, the cylinder and the disc eras overlapped. Moreover, after the disc had gained wide-spread popularity the cylinder survived long enough to undergo technical improvements. In 1908 Edison introduced the Amberol cylinder, extending playing time from two minutes to four minutes. In 1912 he introduced what is known as the wear-proof Blue Amberol cylinder (Walsh 1952:359). After the big record companies shifted their attention either partially or completely to discs, the French company Pathé made cylinder recordings until 1910, while Edison remained in the cylinder business until the 1920s.

Besides overlapping in the times of their current use, cylinders and discs seem to have duplicated their repertoire offering. There is no reason to believe that the music recorded on cylinders around 1904 or 1905 was significantly different from that recorded on discs. Furthermore, it is conceivable that in some instances discs were duplicated directly from cylinders. In Egypt we know of at least one such instance in which the local Mechian record company attempted to copy on a disc a cylinder recording by 'Abdū al-Ḥāmulī (Kāmil 1971:37).
Since the business and the consumption of records has always been a
pan-Middle Eastern phenomenon, Egyptian recordings can now be found in
Aleppo, Damascus, Bagdad, Beirut, Jerusalem, and many other places, including
small towns and villages. Although these recordings are treated mostly as
obsolete household items often discarded in attics or sold in antique shops,
one may find a few impressive disc collections. In Cairo, Maktabat al-Fann,
the Public Record Library, provides a catalogued collection of discs and
facilities for listening. On the private level there are at least three well-known
collections. The largest one which was one of our major sources of information,
containing more than 6,000 discs, is owned by Mr. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz
al-‘Anānī.

Cylinder collections in Cairo are scarce. Besides a handful of small
private collections, the Ma'had al-Mūsīqā al-‘Arabiyyah, the Conservatory of
Arabic Music owned one such collection.

Information about Egyptian disc recordings was assembled mainly by
investigating the histories of the recording companies that recorded in Egypt
during the first few decades of the twentieth century and, secondly, by
examining specimens of records, recording labels, and disc catalogues. Among
Egyptian disc collectors we found a number of disc catalogues dating from
1924 to the middle 1930s (with the exception of one Odeon catalogue dated
1913-14). These catalogues, appearing in Arabic and sometimes with title
pages both in Arabic and in French, were prepared and printed in Cairo by
local agents of various record companies. The catalogues we encountered
represented the following companies: Gramophone, Columbia, Odeon, Pathé,
Baidaphon, and Mechian, all of which are either British, German, French, or
Middle Eastern companies.

The data gathered enable us to divide extant Egyptian recordings made
before the early 1930s into the following major categories.

GRAMOPHONE

The Gramophone Company was probably the first European company
to record in Egypt. Having been actively involved with Egyptian music during
the entire phonograph era, this company is credited with recording many
famous Egyptian singers. Before World War I it recorded Shaykh Yūsuf
al-Manyalawi (d. 1911), and after the war under its His Master's Voice label it
recorded Um Kalthūm (ca. 1899-1975) and others. It is not surprising that
this British company had such keen interest in recording Egyptian music
during the early 1900s in view of its earlier ambitious ventures outside
Europe. At the time when the Gramophone Company was seeking expansion,
Egypt was a very inviting territory. Already under British economic and political control, Egypt had a musically tolerant population and presented a potentially large market. Furthermore, by the turn of the century the social status and popularity of the secular urban musicians in Egypt generally improved. Egyptian music was beginning to make itself known to audiences in other Middle Eastern countries. At that time many outstanding musicians from Istanbul, Aleppo, and Damascus either visited Cairo occasionally or resided in Egypt permanently. All of these factors seem to have made early twentieth-century Egypt an extremely attractive business target for British as well as other European recording companies.

During the twenties the Gramophone Company's business record looked impressive. A catalogue printed in Egypt in 1928 mentioned that the company employed 15,000 workers, displaying pictures of the company's factories in England, France, Spain, Czechoslovakia, India, and the United States. Soon after 1925, like most other companies elsewhere, the Company adopted the electrical recording technique, replacing the old acoustical methods. This technical development provided new horizons in the world of recording (Ford 1962:266). The microphone eliminated overcrowding of the performers around the recording horn in the studio and now made possible the successful recording of instruments whose weak sonority was previously considered inadequate or problematic for recording purposes (Green 1959:138).

The degree of Gramophone's involvement with Egyptian music is illustrated by the large variety of disc recordings carrying its various names and trademarks. The following is a grouping of Gramophone Egyptian discs that appeared during the various stages of the company's history.

First (as illustrated by Fig. 1) is a number of very early disc recordings on whose labels the company's name reads "The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd., and Sister Companies." These discs, very rare now, are seven inches, black-labelled, and recorded only on one side. They were made most probably before 1904. This same company name, with the word "Typewriter Ltd." added, appeared on disc labels between 1900 and 1908, after the company had ventured into a short-lived typewriter manufacturing business.

In the light of the general history of disc recording, these Black-label discs represent an excellent example of early non-celebrity recordings. For instance, on the whole, the performer's name is either completely missing from the label or appears only in what seems to be a French transliteration. On the other hand, the title of the recorded selection is written down conspicuously in Arabic, which shows that these recordings were appealing to customers not necessarily because of the performer's name, but for the popularity of the pieces recorded. Some of these pieces are generally attributed to well-known late-nineteenth-century Egyptian composers. One interesting example among this group of recordings is a disc whose label presents the performer's name as such: Grazia (theatre Cheikh Salami); Grazia
being a practically unheard of female singer who was obviously associated with the theatrical group of the celebrity Shaykh Salāmah Ḥijāzī (d. 1917).

Second are a few discs made by Gramophone but carrying Zonophone labels (See Fig. 2). The distribution of these discs began in Europe around 1903 when Gramophone bought the Zonophone recording company, but
continued to use the Zonophone labels with Gramophone’s official name added. Extant Egyptian recordings on this label are all pre-World War I.

Obviously, unlike the previously discussed group of records, these Zonophones contained recordings by widely-known Egyptian singers. Although the Gramophone Company, we are told, kept this label for low-priced records in Europe, there is no evidence that it did the same in Egypt. The various Zonophone discs existed in a spectrum of colors, e.g., pink, orange, white, and dark green. They contained recordings by artists who were considered highly accomplished before World War I, such as ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥilmī (d. 1912) and Muḥammad Sālim al-Kabīr (1840-1929), whose name appears on the label above and whose recordings were advertised in Cairo newspapers in 1907 and 1908 (Al-Muʿayyad Sept. 11, 1907:7, and Jan. 5, 1908:6). Recordings by these artists were probably high-priced.

Third is a fairly common and diversified category of discs whose labels exist in a variety of colors and display the familiar miniature of an angel. On these labels the company’s name usually reads “The Gramophone Company, Limited and Sister Companies” or just “Gramophone Co., Ltd.” (See Fig. 3) or “Deutsche Grammophon Aktiengesellschaft, Berlin.” These pre-World War I recordings covered a very wide array of Egyptian musical performances. Celebrated Egyptian artists who recorded on these labels were the singers Shaykh Sayyid al-Ṣaftī (b. 1875), whose early recordings were advertised in 1907 Cairo newspapers (Al-Muʿayyad Sept. 11, 1907:7), Shaykh Yūsuf al-Manyalāwī, ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥilmī (on the buff-colored Fig. 3 label) and the nāy player Amīn al-Buzarī. Incidentally, a portion of the labels on these discs seem
to be the first Egyptian recording labels to replace the exquisite Arabic calligraphy with standard Arabic print.

Fourth is a large group of Gramophone records carrying the universally recognized “His Master’s Voice” label (Fig. 4). This label was adopted by British Gramophone around 1910 (Bennett 1957:iii). It displayed the well-known miniature of a terrier listening through the horn of a disc phonograph. Generally unknown is the fact that this label is actually a copy of a painting by a nonrenowned English artist, Francis Barraud. Disc buyers all over the globe were captivated by this label design, although we learn from Gramophone magazine (Wimbush 1973:472) that the His Master’s Voice theme did not achieve a howling success in Egypt because Egyptians considered the dog to be an impure animal. His Master’s Voice labels carried the names of great post-World War I Egyptian celebrities such as the female singer Um Kalthum, ‘Abd al-Wahhab (b. 1902) and the famous violinist from Syria, Sāmī al-Shawwā (1889-1965) (on the Fig. 4 label).

In Egypt during the 1920s Red labels were reserved for the highest priced discs. According to a His Master’s Voice catalogue printed in Cairo in 1928, Red-label 12-inch discs by Shaykh Yūsuf al-Manyalāwī cost 35 piasters each. Red-label discs by Um Kalthūm were 35 piasters for the 12-inch and 27 piasters for the 10-inch. Blue-label 12-inch discs by ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥilmī were 27 piasters and the rest, being Prune 10-inch discs, were 18 piasters each. Finally, one interesting group in the Egyptian His Master’s Voice family is comprised of some 75 recordings made on a noncommercial basis by the
Congress of Arabic Music held in Cairo in 1932. At present, samples from this group exist in a few Middle Eastern and European collections. Appearing under Light Yellow labels, these Egyptian records are part of a larger collection made in 1932 by the performing groups who attended the Congress and who came from participating countries, including Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Tunisia, and Morocco. Labels on these records specify the country to which the recorded material belongs. They are titled: "Congrès de la Musique Arabe, Caire, 1932." Looking at the complete lists of these recordings in the *Book of the Congress*, printed in Cairo in 1933, I notice that they all fall under one independent catalogue series (*Kitāb Mu'tamar al-Mūsīqā* 1933:120). Prefixed by H. C., the catalogue numbers on these discs begin with "1" and increase systematically.

COLUMBIA

Another major British company involved with Egyptian music was Columbia. This company was much less active in Egypt than its British counterpart, the Gramophone Company. Besides, it began to make Egyptian disc recordings at a much later date.

The Columbia Gramophone Company, Ltd. of England began as a branch of the Columbia Phonograph Company established in the United States in 1889. The company's name, Columbia, was named after the District of Columbia in the United States, where it was originally licensed to conduct business.

All Egyptian Columbia discs and catalogues seem to belong to post-World War I years. A general Columbia catalogue printed in Egypt in 1928 was the earliest dated Columbia catalogue I could find. It advertised about 130 electrically-recorded discs of Egyptian music, besides announcing that Stellio Tzoulaquis and Co. were the sole Columbia agents in Egypt, Sudan, and Palestine. According to this catalogue, artists recorded extensively by Columbia were Ṣāliḥ ‘Abd al-Ḥayy (1896-1963) and Zakī Murād.

Egyptian Columbia discs and labels, all made by the British branch, contrast with those made by the Gramophone Company in many ways. They are much more uniform in size and appearance. All extant Egyptian Columbia discs seem to be of the standard 10-inch size. The labels basically adhere to one design and color. Being in solid green, the labels display the "magic notes" trademark and legend. They read in Arabic and in English: Columbia, and in smaller print (in English) "Columbia Graphophone Co. Limited-London, E.C.1. Made in England." The Arabic writing on the label appears both in calligraphic form and in standard Arabic print (Fig. 5).

Despite this uniformity there is one visual clue by which we can tell whether a Columbia disc was made before or after 1925, the year that marked
the beginning of electrical recording. Post-1925 disc labels usually include an Arabic phrase stating that the disc is “made through a special invention” (a reference to electrical recording). Fortunately there is also an aural clue. Many post-1925 discs insert before the familiar spoken announcement heard at the beginning of side-one the following expression in colloquial Arabic: “an electrical recording! discs without noise!”—a motto that caught the attention of the disc audience in the late 1920s and still amuses listeners of old Columbia discs. Figure 5 is a good example of a post-1925 Columbia label. Judged by its content, the label belongs to a recording released around 1932. The performer is Nādirah (b. 1905) (a female singer) and the selection is a song from the “cinematographic play” “Unshūdat al-Fu‘ād,” directed by Nahhās Sphinx Film Company, music composed by Zakarīyyāl-Ḥāmid (1896-1961). The historical importance of this film, premiered in 1932, is discussed below.

ODEON

The prolific company known as Odeon made remarkable endeavors in recording Middle Eastern music. Odeon’s role in Egyptian musical life was evident as early as 1905. Before World War I it recorded artists widely famous in Egypt and the rest of the Middle East. Shaykh Salāmah Ḥijāzī and other celebrities may have recorded exclusively for this company. Odeon also recorded a good deal of religious music. The 1913-14 Odeon catalogue, listing some 458 records, included twelve double-sided 27 cm (ca. 11½ inches) discs
of Koranic chants performed by three different Shaykhs (Muslim priests). The idea of listening to religious music on phonograph records seems to have been fully condoned by Egyptian Muslims at that time. In fact, we read in a 1906 issue of al-Muqtataf (April, Vol. XXXI, 1906:353) that a prominent religious authority in Egypt (Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ḥanafi) had made a written statement in which he sanctioned the recording of Koranic text on phonograph records, provided the recordings reproduced the Holy Scripture accurately with the sounds properly articulated, and that the records were listened to in an appropriate religious spirit.

After the war Odeon continued to play an important role in Egypt, attested to by the relatively large numbers of surviving Odeon catalogues in Cairo, and the diversity and richness of the material encompassed by these catalogues. A 1931 catalogue advertised records by Shaykh Sayyid Darwish (d. 1923), Um Kalthūm and many other famous artists. It also included excerpts from a number of plays. These excerpts, taken from Arabic renditions of “Macbeth,” “King Oedipus,” “Othello,” and “Louis XI,” were performed on the records by the renowned stage actor George Abyad (b. 1880). The catalogue also publicized six discs of background music composed by Bahījah Ḥāfiz. These discs according to the catalogue, were meant to accompany an Egyptian silent film titled “Zaynab,” in which the above Egyptian actress and composer played major roles. During the 1920s such catalogues spoke in terms of “Odeon” ensembles, “Odeon” composers, and “Odeon” lyric writers.

Extant Egyptian Odeon records may be divided into two large categories. The first is the variety of pre-World War I discs whose labels display the company’s official name, the “International Talking Machine Co. m.b.H.” The oldest group in this category is apparently made up of one-sided, 14-inch discs which may have been released as early as 1904, before the company had introduced its double-sided disc. Incidentally, the 14-inch discs, which played for about five minutes, and other exceptionally large discs, were originally made not to extend the playing time of a recording, but to produce a better sound quality resulting from the more widely-spaced grooves (Dennis 1960:179). In Egypt these mammoth-sized discs are rarely played today because they require a larger than average turntable. Muḥammad Sālim al-Kabīr, accompanied by the violinist Ibrāhīm Sahluṅ (d. 1920), is featured on some of these discs. Other 14-inch Odeon recordings are by Aḥmad Ḥasanyn. This singer was referred to as “the late Ahmad Ḥasanyn” in a 1907 newspaper ad (Al-Mu‘ayyad Sept. 2, 1907:6). Obviously he belongs to the pioneer group of accomplished Egyptian artists who recorded commercially on discs.

Labels on recordings of this oldest group are dark blue. Besides displaying Odeon’s domed theatre trademark, they usually list Odeon’s patents in different countries. The number of patents varies on different labels, ranging from four to five to ten. Similar labels are found on another old
Odeon group made up of 11¾- and 12-inch double-sided discs. In this group we find recordings by Sulaymān Abū Dāwūd and Shaykh Salāmah Ḥijbāzī.

Among Pre-World War I Odeon recordings there is one especially attractive group, Odeon’s celebrity discs (see Fig. 6). Labels on these discs still mention the company’s name—International Talking Machine Co. m.b.H—but do not list any patents. Instead these labels display the title, often in thick white letters: Arabian Celebrity Odeon Record. These celebrity labels contrast sharply with the previously discussed Odeon labels; their design is very impressive and their colors striking. Combining Red and White in an artistic manner, these special labels were used for a certain category of musical selections which sold for higher prices, much like the Gramophone Red-Seal records sold in Europe. Some of the Egyptian performers recorded by Odeon on celebrity discs were ‘Abd al-Ḥāyy Hilmī, Shaykh Salāmah Ḥijbāzī (on Fig. 6 label), and the female singer, who is scarcely heard of today, ‘Āsmā al-Kumsāriyyah.

The second category includes Egyptian recordings made mostly after World War I. Labels on recordings of this category drop the early company’s official name—International Talking Machine Co. m.b.H. Instead these retain and highlight the trademark name “Odeon” and usually add the “made in Germany” legend in small print. The colors of these labels vary considerably, which makes them reminiscent of the multi-colored His Master’s Voice labels. (Figure 7 is a Red label on one of Um Kalthūm’s popular recordings.)
POLYPHON

Of all the European companies, next to Gramophone and Odeon, Polyphon probably played the greatest role in preserving Egyptian music on commercial records. Like Gramophone and Odeon discs, Polyphon discs are abundant in Cairo. It is difficult, however, to ascertain when that company began its activities in Egypt.

A survey of Egyptian Polyphon records shows that Polyphon discs are not as old as Gramophone and Odeon discs and that they were made mostly by artists active during or after World War I. However, these performers were generally not of the same high celebrity status as some of the artists of Odeon and Gramophone. Among the exceptionally famous Polyphon performers were Shaykh Sayyid al-Ṣafī, who was also a major Odeon artist, and Shaykh Abū al-‘Ulā Muḥammad (1878-1943), who also performed for the Gramophone Company. Figure 8 is an Orange label on a recording by the latter artist. Through the 1920s Polyphon recorded only a few selections by Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, who achieved fame as a recording artist of Baidaphon, a major Middle Eastern record company.

How late Polyphon continued to record in Egypt is unknown. It is definite, however, that the company was active in Egypt in the late 1920s and most probably during the 1930s. I was able to solicit information from the company’s light brown disc envelopes. Many such envelopes advertised specific
electrical recordings, which substantiates that Polyphon continued to record in the Middle East after 1925. The same envelopes name J. Kāldrūn (Caldron?) as the sole agent for Polyphon in Cairo, Alexandria, Haifa, and Beirut.

**PATHÉ**

Pathé, which may have first entered the arena of commercial recording in Egypt as a cylinder manufacturer, was a latecomer to the disc recording scene. Extant Pathé discs appear to have been recorded by post-World War I Egyptian artists who on the whole were not very famous. In an undated general Pathé catalogue (apparently from the 1920s), the only such catalogue I found in Cairo, there is a list of approximately 100 discs recorded by about a dozen Egyptian performers. The only fairly well-known artists among them were perhaps Śālīh ‘Abd al-Ḥayy, Zakariyyā Aḥmad, and Zākī Murād.

This company’s early cylinder recordings did not carry the Pathé name (Barnes 1954:7). The cardboard recording containers often displayed the names of the department store in which they were sold, also the names of the performer and the recorded selection, both handwritten in ink. These features are true of the Egyptian cylinder label made in black and white, which was discussed earlier and is illustrated in Figure 9.

Pathé’s early disc recordings were for several years duplicated from cylinder recordings. This technique, used also by Edison in the United States,
caused technical problems. Discs produced in this fashion had a peculiar property—their grooves were etched by a needle that cut vertically on the disc surface in imitation of the grooves of the copied cylinders. The grooves of normal discs, on the other hand, were cut in a lateral or sidewise fashion. This lateral type was favored and utilized by the major disc companies such as Victor, Gramophone, and Odeon. Pathé's vertical cutting process, which was responsible for the so-called “hill and dale” grooves, was in a way disadvantageous since Pathé discs could not be played by the same type of reproducing head used for other records. This prompted the company, and Edison as well, to produce special “hill and dale” heads to be sold to “hill and dale” record customers (Read and Welch 1959:160). For illustration, the Egyptian Pathé catalogue mentioned earlier informed record buyers that “Pathéphone discs” required special reproducers. It also advertised a “special Pathé head equipped with an imperishable sapphire point,” which cost 40 piasters.

Business relations between Pathé and Egypt were probably initiated around the turn of the century, during the heyday of cylinder recording. While Pathé was leading the cylinder industry in Europe, it had customers and agents in many countries outside the Continent. In the field of disc recording the company’s role in Egypt seems conspicuous, although relatively small after World War I. The agent “Cicurrel Sons and their partners,” described by Pathé’s general catalogue as sole concessionaires in Egypt and Sudan, did not seem to be as influential in the 1920s as the tens of agents scattered all over the Middle East representing Baidaphon, Gramophone, and Odeon.
Pathé's dismal lot in the Egyptian market may have more than one explanation. When Pathé shifted its attention to disc recording, the Gramophone and Odeon Companies were already firmly established in Cairo. This may have made it difficult for Pathé, as well as others, to compete in rival territories. By around 1908 most Egyptian celebrities were already committed to either the Gramophone or the Odeon Companies, some even on a contractual basis.¹¹ On the other hand, it is quite possible that early Pathé discs did not acquire much popularity in Egypt because of their technical idiosyncrasies, especially because they required special playing equipment.

BAIDAPHON

Baidaphon Company was the biggest non-European company to record in the Middle East and North Africa during the phonograph era. Introduced by its catalogues and recording labels as “Compagnie nationale des disques Orientaux,” Baidaphon originated in Beirut, Lebanon, during the first decade of the twentieth century. Before World War I, it became as influential in Egypt and the Near East as other major recording companies.

Baidaphon invested in promising artists. It also sought to sponsor already-accomplished performers in the Near East, Egypt, and North Africa who would bring the company publicity and profits. By the mid-1920s Baidaphon catalogues were replete with big names. They also offered a wide variety of selections. One 1926 catalogue that specialized in Near Eastern artists listed recordings by Farajallah Bayda, Muḥyī al-Dīn Baʿyīn, and Yūsuf Tāj, who were famous singers in Lebanon. The same catalogue also listed Greek Orthodox hymns, Armenian popular songs, and Turkish instrumental compositions.

In Egypt the company released recordings by the Egyptian celebrity ʿAbd al-Ḥaṭṭī Hilmī before 1912, the year of his death. The company also acquired the right to record the voice of the Egyptian female celebrity Munīrah al-Mahdiyyah (d. 1965). This singer, who was greatly admired in Egypt during the first quarter of the twentieth century, became a major Baidaphon recording artist before 1914. Many extant Baidaphon catalogues from the 1920s take pride in including a fascimile of a letter by this singer dated June, 1914, addressed to the owners of Baidaphon in Egypt, and congratulating them for “excelling over any other company” in recording her voice “just as it is naturally,” a publicity tactic employed by other companies as well. In the late 1920s an important Baidaphon artist was the young Muhammad ʿAbd al-Wahḥāb, who ascended to popularity partly through his theatrical songs and later through his musical films. A leading Baidaphon artist for several years, he recorded many of his most popular film songs during the 1930s on Baidaphon records.
The history of that Company is difficult to reconstruct for lack of documentation. Luckily Mr. Eliyya Bayḍā, a well-known Lebanese singer, and a Baidaphon recording artist, as well as an immediate relative of the founders of the company supplied most of the information. According to him, the company owes its origin to five ambitious members of the Christian Bayḍā (Baida) family1 from the Muṣayṭibah quarter of Beirut. Two of them were Jibrān (Mr. Bayḍā's father) and Farajallah (the same Baidaphon recording artist mentioned earlier). These two brothers, who were practically illiterate, earned their living first as construction workers in Beirut. The remaining founders included their two fairly educated cousins Butrus and Jibrān. Encouraged by the rising popularity of phonograph recording and by the ready talent of their cousin Farajallah, they decided to form with their cousins their own recording company. Since this idea was enthusiastically approved by all, what remained was to negotiate a deal with a European record manufacturing company. After several unsuccessful attempts the Bayḍās' aspirations materialized when one German company agreed to record and manufacture discs for them in Berlin. In their negotiations the two Baidas were assisted substantially by their brother Michel, a physician living in Berlin, the fifth founder.12

While still in Berlin the Baida brothers inaugurated their recording business career by sending for their cousin Farajallah and the Beirutī ṭūd accompanist Qāsim al-Durzi to join them and make their first recordings there. Back in Beirut, with records ready to sell, the Bayḍās opened a small record shop on Martyrs Square, downtown Beirut, around 1907. Soon after, the company began to record local talent, aided by the European engineers who made periodical recording missions to the area. It was probably a matter of months before the company recorded in Egypt and the rest of the Middle East. Nevertheless, the company's popularity grew rapidly. Besides offering good recording quality, it appealed to recording artists and customers as a national rather than a foreign enterprise. In addition, it often boasted about its superb choice of recorded materials. A Baidaphon catalogue of 1926 stated that the company had its own musical specialists in Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Iraq, whose job was "to select the most wonderful adwār and taqātiq" (sing. taqītiq, a vocal genre).

Extant Baidaphon catalogues show that during the twenties the company was already operating in a territory that extended as far as Tunisia to the west, and as far east as Iraq, Syria, and even Iran. However, the sale of Baidaphon records was not restricted to the Middle-Eastern-North African market. Still existing disc envelopes made by Baidaphon during the 1920s remark that Baidaphon customers living in North and South America, as well as in Europe, may order their Baidaphon records directly from the company's office on Mittelstr. 55, Berlin.
The activities of Baidaphon Company continued in Egypt throughout the 1930s. After the death of Butrus Baydā (ca. 1931), which resulted in disagreements among the company’s heirs, a new partner from Egypt entered the scene. This partner was Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, himself a Baidaphon recording celebrity. By the mid-1940s, while operations continued as usual in the Near East and in North Africa, the Egyptian Baidaphon branch had already been transformed into a new Egyptian record company known as Cairophone.

Disc recordings made by Baidaphon during the phonograph era may be divided into two main categories. The first category is composed of items made during the company’s initial years of operation (from ca. 1907 to ca. 1911). On the record labels the word Baidaphon does not yet appear. Instead we read the title “Baida Record,” with the phrase “Baida Cousins, Beyrouth, Syrie.” On some of these labels we also read in Arabic “Wārid Bayḍā Abnā’ ‘Amm,” that is “Imports of Baida Cousins.” The word “Cousins” was dropped around World War I, after one of the Bayḍā cousins (Jibran, Farajallah’s brother) died. The primary ownership of the company then fell to the three brothers Butrus, Jibrān, and Michel, who handled the company’s affairs in Egypt, the near East, and North Africa, respectively. Another group, perhaps made a little later, shows on its labels the following phrase: Baida Record, Beyrouth, Cairo, Berlin. An example of such labels is Figure 10, which uniquely displays in the upper half of the label a picture of the Egyptian singer who recorded the disc, Shaykh Sayyid al-Ṣaffī.

![Figure 10](attachment:image_url)
Upon examining these early recordings one finds a remarkable similarity between Baida records and early Odeon recordings. Both companies use the 27 cm disc size extensively. Both companies also employ the special "celebrity disc label" for a select number of performers. Another remarkable point of similarity lies in the catalogue numbers, which in both cases have a "No." prefix. These similarities make it conceivable that Baydā's connection in Germany was the Odeon Company itself or else Baydā's records were closely modelled after records made by Odeon.

The second category consists of records equipped with labels titled "Baidaphon." These labels also present a picture of a gazelle as the company's official trademark. The title "Baidaphon" appeared on the labels probably a few years after the company was established. Succeeding the "Baida Record" label was the "Baidaphon" label, which remained in use throughout the company's history. All the "Baidaphon"-labelled discs I encountered displayed the picture of the gazelle. The gazelle was a prominent symbol in Arabic literature, always associated with charming elegance and poetic beauty. This symbol was definitely more attuned to Middle Eastern aesthetics than was the Dog presented on the His Master's Voice label. Baidaphon catalogue often referred to Baidaphon records as "Iṣṭiwa'at al-Ghazālah," "the Female Gazelle Records," in compliance with the common practice of calling records by their trademarks, thus "Angel," "Polyphon," "Odeon," etc.

Baidaphon records often carried Orange labels before the 1920s. The variety in label color and design gradually increased. In the 1930s a purple Baidaphon label, on a recording by Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, displayed not only one gazelle, but two in a mirror image.
On discs of the second category we find familiar names such as Shaykh Abū al-‘Ulā Muḥammad, Munīrah al-Mahdiyyah, and Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Wahhāb. Figure 11 is a Red Label on a recording by Munīrah al-Mahdiyyah.

MECHIAN

The manufacture of Egyptian recordings was not confined to Europe or the United States. Some were made in a small factory in Cairo, owned and operated by an Armenian from Egypt whose name was Setrak Mechian. Operating for nearly three decades, Mechian recorded artists such as Sulaymān Abū Dāwūd, another early recording pioneer in Egypt. After World War I, Mechian recorded several Egyptian artists, some very well-known, such as Shaykh Sayyid Darwīsh. During the late 1920s and early 1930s Mechian sponsored Shaykh Muḥammad Ṣūḥ (1898-1941). Six songs by this artist constitute the sole content of a 1931 catalogue supplement, the only pre-1932 Mechian publication I was able to find. Performers recorded by Mechian usually had modest artistic reputations. On the whole they were not comparable in number and in status to the celebrities recorded by Baidaphon and others. The position held by many Mechian artists was probably a direct consequence of the low technical quality characterizing Mechian recordings. Modern collectors usually attribute the surface noise or the static heard on Mechian records to the unrefined material from which the records were made.

On the other hand, Mechian’s record business is credited by many Egyptians today for what it offered to Egyptian music. Because it was self-sufficient during the years of World War I, when recording engineers of foreign companies were no longer available in Cairo, Mechian’s factory became a refuge for Egyptian recording artists. Mechian’s factory, many believe, salvaged and popularized music which could otherwise have been forgotten. Some highly appraised Mechian recordings (about a dozen) were made by the Egyptian composer and singer Sayyid Darwīsh.

Lack of documentation again hampered our efforts to reconstruct Mechian’s history. Mechian’s involvement in disc sales may have actually preempted any manufacturing. Mechian-made discs may have appeared on the market as early as 1908. This possibility is attested to by some of my informants, including Mr. Khalīl al-Maṣrī, a former director of the Odeon Company in Egypt. It is also supported by the pre-World War I names appearing on Mechian labels. Mechian’s business however, ran on a small scale; the factory lacked personnel and sophisticated equipment. One of my informants was Mr. ʿAbd al-Salām al-Qabbānī, a senior Egyptian who visited Mechian’s factory during the 1920s. According to him, Setrak Mechian was a dynamic character who ran his factory on 16 ʿAbd al-‘Azīz Street like a one-man orchestra. He recorded the performers; he announced himself in his
unmistakable accent the performer's name and the phrase "Istiwanāt Mechian," "Mechian Records." He also pressed the discs on his machine and sold them himself in the factory. Mechian's business probably peaked during the 1920s, as we can surmise from the 1931 Mechian catalogue supplement mentioned earlier. On the title page of this supplement there is a reference— with illustrations—of the "Grand Prix" medals which Mechian discs received in Rome in 1920 and in Paris and Egypt in 1926. Unlike Baidaphon, Mechian's company did not grow into a pan-Middle Eastern-North African enterprise. During field research I did not encounter any names of Mechian agents outside Egypt or even outside Cairo.

Records made by Setrak Mechian are predominantly 11¾ inches in size. Few are small 7-inch discs, recorded on both sides. Existing in a spectacular variety of colors, Mechian labels display the company's trademark, a symmetrical sketch of two lions holding a huge out-of-proportion disc between them. Those labels, on the other hand, demonstrate a very curious inconsistency in the design and in the exact wording of the official name of the company. There is also an inconsistency in the language used, which in addition to Arabic, may be English, French, or both juxtaposed. Figure 12 is a Red label on a recording by Shaykh Maḥmūd Subḥ.

Last of all, during the first three decades of the twentieth century, many less important labels appeared on the Egyptian market. These labels, of which there are very few samples today, were apparently all introduced and sponsored by European companies. Among these were: Orfeon, Favorite, Homochord, Perfectaphone, and the mysterious Sama' al-Mulūk. Orfeon

Figure 12
recordings, whose labels read on the top "Blumenthal Record and Talking Machine Co..." were made by pre-World War I Egyptian artists such as Sulaymān Abū Dāwūd. Favorite was another pre-World War I label on which artists such as Shaykh Sayyid al-Ṣafī and Sulaymān Abū Dāwūd had recorded. Favorite labels I encountered in Egypt displayed either of two legends: “reproduced in Linden” (an industrial town in the State of New Jersey) or “reproduced in Hanover.” Homochord appears to be a post-World War I label. Among those who recorded on this label were Sāliḥ ʿAbd al-Ḥayy and Shaykh Zakariyyāʾ Aḥmad. The Homochord label trademark is characterized by an obelisk against a plain light background. Perfectaphone, also a post-World War I label, displayed an elaborate layout—a three-dimensional multi-colored miniature of a woman playing a lyre and wearing a Greek toga. Little discs flow out from the strings of the lyre. On each side of the miniature there is a Greek key motif in a modified triangular shape.

These unmistakable allusions to Greek antiquity were encountered earlier in the case of Odeon and Orfeon, both names derived from ancient Greek. The use of classical motifs on recording labels was probably indicative of an attempt to associate the emerging recording industry with the established serious musical institutions, such as concert halls and opera theatres, which also employed classic architecture and Greek names.

Among the very few individuals who recorded on the Homochord label were the violinist Sāmī al-Shawwā and Badiʿah Maṣābnī, a Lebanese singer, actress, and dancer who performed in Egypt during the 1920s and 1930s. Lastly, Samaʾ al-Mulāk, which in Arabic literally meant “the listening of kings” or “royal audition,” was the name of a label which lead an ephemeral life in Egypt during the first decade of the twentieth century. This label, which appeared on high-priced discs and which was typified by a rather crude gold design on a royal blue background was used exclusively on some sixty recordings by the Egyptian celebrity Shaykh Yūsuf al-Manṣūlāwī. The regal title given to the label obviously referred to the fact that during the 1880s al-Manṣūlāwī had sung before ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd II (Sultan of Turkey 1876-1909), earning an honorary medal and prestige (Rızq n.d.:118).

THE CLOSING OF AN ERA

Egyptian phonograph history and recordings made only before the mid-1930s have been examined here. I have discussed the crop of recordings made during what may be considered the phonograph era in Egypt. The closing year of this era is roughly the year 1932. The choice of this date is prompted by several historical and musical factors that had crucially challenged the efficacy of the disc in Egyptian musical life. For example, April
14, 1932, marked the premiere of the first Egyptian musical film (Tawfiq 1969:36). This is the film described earlier in this paper. In Egypt the musical film functioned as the most popular and effective medium of musical dissemination that drove the disc to a second position.

The decline in the role of disc manufacture and sale around 1931 was a world-wide phenomenon that undoubtedly affected Egypt because most Egyptian discs were manufactured by European companies. In addition, the popularity of the phonograph in Egypt was seriously hampered by private radio stations, which mushroomed all over the country during the late 1920s and early 1930s culminating with the opening of the Egyptian National Radio Station on May 31, 1934 (Shushah n.d.:42).

Consequently, film production and the radio transmission of music not only diminished the importance of the disc as a mass medium, but also seriously competed with the record company as a major musical institution. In a sense the early 1930s may thus be regarded as the beginning of a new post-phonograph era in Egypt.

NOTES

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1. This article appeared originally in a 1906 issue of Appleton’s Magazine. In 1968 it was reproduced in Musical Box Society, Vol. XV, No. 2 (Christmas Issue), pp. 50-56.

2. The journal here comments on a U.S. news item on the use of the phonograph as a “talking dictionary” to aid language students. The journal expresses doubts that the phonograph would ever be able to reproduce the Arabic sounds “‘ayn and ḥa”.

In this article quotes from Arabic are my own translations.

3. The word for “cylinder,” which was used in this and in other ads, is the exact Arabic translation istiwannah (pl. istiwannah); but when the disc became fashionable the word remained in use in the Arabic-speaking world to mean “disc.”

4. In 1972, 100 piasters were equal to one Egyptian pound and the pound was equivalent to a little over two U.S. dollars.

5. In Egypt during the early twentieth century the names of record store owners, record company agents, and directors were often non-Egyptian, either Turkish, Greek, Syrian, Armenian, or European.

6. It is difficult to tell exactly when this cylinder box tag was made. It may have been used for a number of years on a variety of Egyptian cylinder recordings. The two cylinder labels discussed above belong to the private collection of Mr. ‘Abd al-Salim al-Qabbani from Cairo.

7. The names of many Egyptian singers were preceded by the title Shaykh, indicating their religious education and musical training.

8. Disc labels illustrated in this article belong to recordings found in Mr. al-Anani’s collection.

9. According to Bennet (Bennet 1957:iii) “The Angel Trade Mark was still in use in February 1910; in March the Dog appeared on the back of the catalogue, in November on the front page. In the following year the Angel and the Dog represented the official Trade Marks, both featured on the front page of the February list and finally, in November 1911, attention was drawn to the Dog as representing the principal Trade Mark of the Company.”
10. Gramophone's "Red-seal" discs were supposedly recorded on one side only. However, all the red-labeled discs we encountered in Egypt were recorded on both sides as regular discs.

11. One example of a contracted artist was ʻIbrāhīm al-Qabbānī (1852-1927), who according to his son Mr. ʻAbd al-Salām, earned a 200 Egyptian pound annual fee from the Gramophone Company in return for not recording for any other companies.

12. One question that may still be asked here is: Why was it in Germany that the Lebanese Baydā's were able to negotiate a deal and not in any other European countries? There may be several explanations. International politics may have played a positive role, notwithstanding the fact that at that time Germany was the center for record manufacturing in Europe. Furthermore, we do not know the specific company or factory in Germany with whom the Baydā's made their agreement. Neither do we know the details of any terms nor the extent of any obligations that might have been negotiated, legal or otherwise.

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