LUCKY CHARM RANCH  
Bisbee, Arizona

EDISON IN MEXICO, 1904-1912: A PRELIMINARY STUDY. - by L. E. Andersen.

About the Author...

My interest in Mexican music began during the War when a friend gave me an album, "A Program of Mexican Music," of orchestral and choral performances conducted by Carlos Chávez. It still remains in my library, OPA ceiling prices neatly listed inside its back cover. The records are worn nearly to pieces, but the interest they sparked has grown far beyond my expectations.

During part of my Los Angeles residence in the 1950's I lived in the barrio. All my friends including my fiancée were Mexican; here I learned Spanish and spoke it almost exclusively, gaining along the way an insight into the Hispanic culture which later broadened into full appreciation and respect.

Cylinders of Mexican music acquired through my membership in the Santa Monica Society of Early Recorded Music greatly heightened my interest. Even now I remember the stirring performances of the Banda Flamenca Gascon, and the poignant strains of "Allá, cuando era Niño" as sung by Sres. Abrego y Picozo; to this day I play it on the piano, though the record is long gone.

The die truly was cast when Ray Phillips lent me a precious but fragmented Húgen y Acosta cylinder which, when reassembled, proved no less than a performance by legendary flamenco artist El Mochuelo. Living later in the Chicago Cuban community, I mentioned this to my elderly landlady, a former Canary Islander; she paled and sat down with tears in her eyes. In hushed tones she asked, "You... heard... El Mochuelo?" As a girl she had seen him perform, but never had heard his name since.

My interest waned during subsequent years amongst English speakers, but reawakened when I had occasion to travel in Mexico and Guatemala, particularly on attending concerts of La Banda Estatal de Oaxaca which transported me back to pre-Revolutionary times. Needless to say, my move to southeast Arizona where my little ranch is but a few miles from the Border brought matters full circle: Two years ago I began serious research on Edison's 2-minute cylinders.

Ironically, acquisition of a large lot of these from the same Ray Phillips, still active in the fraternity, has enabled me to begin writing on the subject: I believe that to write competently on recorded material, one must live with it and hear it.

My data, though adequate for this preliminary study, are by no means sufficient for a major detailed work which I plan in future. Therefore I must appeal to you, my readers and fellow researchers, for any literature, Mexican catalogs, 2-minute cylinders or other pertinent material which I would gladly purchase or request to borrow if not already in hand, hoping meanwhile that this initial essay will help bring the subject to the fore.
EDISON IN MEXICO, 1904-1912: A PRELIMINARY STUDY.
For my friend RAY PHILLIPS, and my wife MARY BETH SUTOR, without whose help this work would not have been possible. - L. E. Andersen.

Edison's first major recording venture in Mexico was not based on mere speculation, nor was the National Phonograph Company the only one to discover that Mexico offered a market for talking machines and records. By 1904 the firm and its predecessor North American had been selling their products in Mexico through agents and importers for roughly a decade, and found the situation promising enough to make a major commitment.

Ralph Cabañas, National's Mexico representative, returned to Mexico City in the spring of 1904 after conferencing at Orange, to supervise installation of a "record plant" at No. 7 Calle Colón, across the street from the United States consulate. Completion was announced in June, as was the "taking of selections of Mexican vocal and instrumental music, executed by the highest class talent in the country."

Recording engineer and expert George J. Werner was sent from Orange to supervise the process; the masters or "proofs" as they sometimes were called were sent back to Orange where moulds were made from them and records manufactured from the moulds. These records then would be sold in Mexico and the United States: Though Mexico was intended as the major market and Cuba secondary, the Edison Phonograph Monthly later would point out the importance of "...States bordering on Mexico, which have a considerable Mexican population."

Thus was established the routine National would use in Mexico for the next several years: A recording "field team" would come from Orange, hold sessions for up to a few months, then return home with a large number of master cylinders for processing there.

In Mexico the wise businessman did not forget the necessity of good "connections," and the approaching birthday of Presidente Porfirio Díaz on 15th September offered a golden opportunity to make political hay. On the 14th a gala press reception was held for much of the afternoon in the salons of the Colón Street headquarters, in which El Presidente's intended birthday gift, an "entirely gold-plated" phonograph in a "beautiful golden box," was exhibited.

On it was inscribed in Spanish: "Special Phonograph presented by Thomas Alva Edison to his Excellency Señor General Porfirio Díaz, President of the United States of Mexico, September fifteenth, nineteen hundred and four."

What truly captivated the reporters, however, was the "proofing," that is, playback, of master cylinders made earlier on the premises. Werner operated the apparatus, amazing the newspapermen with the "naturalness" of its sound, especially in staged bullfight scenes. Then the attendees were invited to view recording styli—real sapphires!—under a microscope; and some even
were permitted to record in the studio and then listen to the "incomparably genuine" results with the rest of the audience.

It was a master stroke. The following day, the papers were full of enthusiastic stories about the occasion, eulogising the recorded performances of various artistes such as popular tiple (soprano) Soledad "Chole" Goyzuea and celebrated Mexican poet Juan de Dios Peza— and, of course, the bullfight scenes. With this heady accompaniment, the actual presentation took place.

With the golden phonograph came an assortment of the new Gold Moulded Mexican cylinders and a formal letter from Thomas Edison. Sr. Cabañas was introduced to El Presidente with great ceremony by General Powell Clayton, the United States ambassador to Mexico, and received after the presentation a personal letter of reply to Edison from Díaz almost lugubrious in its elaborate prose.

So far, National had met with total success: The Mexican operation was off and running; in four months Werner and his staff had secured 203 matrices encompassing a wide variety of talent; and now, the timing and press coverage of the ceremonies had capped the whole affair most beautifully. No-one realised that the seventy-four-year-old Díaz, credited with much of Mexico's material progress and standing as a nation in the XIX Century, in less than seven years would be forced to resign and flee to Spain; or that shortly afterward the Edison wax cylinder itself would vanish.

Production of the new Mexican records at Orange was hurried as quickly as possible, and before the year was out large numbers were reported to have been sold in Mexico. The market also continued to demand popular U.S. marches and ragtime, and Mexican jobbers and dealers did exceptionally well.

Often the music of the two cultures intermingled: As one example, the "cakewalk" in Luis G. Jordá's zarzuela (musical comedy or operetta) Chin-Chun-Chan is actually "A Bunch of Blackberries," written around 1900 by Tin Pan Alley's Abe Holzmann! A rather ponderous rendition by La Banda de Zapadores de México is heard on Edison 18798.

Pre-revolutionary Mexico was sharply divided economically, with mostly wealthier families purchasing complete phonograph outfits. The average peón rarely could aspire to such luxury on an individual basis, although friends or neighbours might combine finances, perhaps even an entire small village; or the poor could of course hear the newfangled entertainment in cantinas or other business locations. More enterprising individuals, however, would buy or borrow a machine and tour the region with "shows," some even on donkey-back, in hopes of successfully passing the hat amongst the listeners in Indian village or local zócalo (town square). Thus there always was a market for records.

NEXT ISSUE: Mexican Edison artistes; the 1907 and 1909 recording expeditions; El Presidente makes a record; collapse of the U.S. market; and crossover list matching 1200-series Blue Standards with original wax-issue numbers.
The 1904 sessions offered much unfamiliar subject matter and technical challenge. Vocalists must be individually recognisable to a public who knew them mainly from the theatre. Exaggerated enunciation and horn gymnastics were routine to U.S. "recording artists," but many Mexican stage performers, initially at least, had to be taught these bizarre techniques from scratch.

Bands emphasised reeds, and orchestras were most or all strings. No Strom could rescue Werner here: the Orquesta Típica Lerdo of pianist-composer Miguel Lerdo de Tejada featured piano, a flute, and a melange of exotic strings. Another pianist-composer, Luis Jordá, led from the keyboard the other members of his quintette: two violins, 'cello, and harmonium. First violin was José Roca-bruna, whose genuine Andrea Amati had cost him three thousand dollars.

Guitars and the archaic lute-like bandurria must retain their unique voices. Mandolins were familiar ground but cockfight sounds were not. Werner and his staff superbly captured these and an incredible variety of folk, concert and operatic singers, vocal and instrumental zarzuela (light opera or musical comedy) selections, traditional and formal instrumental work, poetry and recitations, religious choruses and more in a true sound picture of Mexico.

Edison Phonograph Monthly listed these for U.S. dealers in three installments, January, March and June 1905; beginning with florid praise, later cautioning of small demand "except in States closest to Mexico," and finally limiting them to Foreign, Numerical and Mexican/Cuban Catalogues. National habitually pushed its dealers to stock foreign records for potential foreign-speaking customers and "regulars" desiring quality music not conventionally listed "one needn't speak Italian to enjoy opera." Nevertheless, in November 1907 most Mexican records were relegated to catalogues printed for use in Mexico.

Dealers objecting to thus losing access to popular selections were told in March 1908 that a list was available on demand from the Foreign Dept. But in Sep. 1905 Foreign Dept. manager Walter Stevens described Mexico as "one of the best talking-machine countries there is." By November a near-100% business increase was reported, and in July 1907 EPM observed "the country is growing wealthier in a manner that has no precedent... where a year ago one Record was bought, two are bought to-day and three will be to-morrow."

Under climatic and travel conditions often hostile to fragile wax cylinders, as many as two thousand phonograph exhibitors were reported traveling throughout Mexico, while home demand grew as well. In January 1906 the Mexican National Phonograph Co. was incorporated in New York State with Mexico City headquarters at 67-77 Calle Prolongación del Cinco de Mayo which soon proved too small: In December a four-storey building at 117 Avenida Oriente was leased instead, containing recording, jobbing and business facilities.

Werner and a second expert, F.C. Burt, returned to Mexico City in March 1907 for a second recording marathon, returning in three months with "nearly 200" masters. EPM initially listed only thirteen for U.S. dealers, but good Mexican sales were expected for "operatic selections by famous Mexican singers, pretty dances and instrumental pieces... famous bands..." and the like.
A severe earthquake struck on the night of 14th April. "Our representatives," noted EPM, "escaped with no damage and a large fund of anecdotes," although water spilled from rooftop tanks into the building below. Fourth floor recording facilities miraculously were spared. Werner, returning on a streetcar from the American Circus, "found himself sitting on the knees of a lady to whom he had not been introduced. (She) would not wait for his apologies but rushed with the rest of the frightened passengers for the door."

Burt "was writing at his hotel when the floor began to move, the walls to wriggle and the ceiling to follow suit. He made a leap for the stairs and found they were behaving curiously. Every occupant of the hotel assembled in the streets, fearing a repetition of the San Francisco disaster... the only calm individual was an intemperate gentleman who assured his fellow guests that moving stair cases, heaving floors and trembling walls were phenomena of such usual occurrence with him that he paid no attention to them.

If Mexican earth shook, National's market there did not. But in the U.S. it still pushed its dealers for "a greater interest in Foreign Records" with pleas from General Sales Manager F.K. Dolbeer and a new Foreign Catalogue of 924 selections including 38 Mexican. The U.S. Mexican market didn't budge.

On 1st January 1908 Cabañas joined the Foreign Dept. in New York and was replaced as Mexican National manager by L.L. Lewis, formerly in charge of International Correspondence School's Language Study Dept. at Chicago's major music house of Lyon & Healy; ICS and National were long-time partners.

Werner and Burt made their last 2-minute cylinder recording trip to Mexico City in April 1909, also taking some new 4-minute records which this study does not address. In August EPM announced their return from "our most successful recording trip to Mexico:" high-class performers were emphasised such as harpist Rita Villa, cellist Luis Rocha, concert and operatic singers, and Rocabrufna in three soli besides his usual ensemble work. About 180 masters were made "under the personal supervision and criticism of Sr. Arturo Rocha, assistant director of the Conservatorio Nacional de Musica y Declamation, Mexico."

In mid-August, about a month before his 79th birthday and in advance of a planned meeting of the Mexican and U.S. Presidents, Porfirio Díaz himself waxed a reply to Thomas Edison's invitational letter on the same machine Taft had used to record campaign speeches before the 1908 election. Placed on sale in mid-October, the cylinder marked "the first time that a ruler of a great Nation has made a Record of his own voice for distribution in this manner. Its message, in Spanish, reflected El Presidente's friendship and admiration for the inventor; copies for U.S. sale came with a bilingual flyer.

But an era was coming to an end. The old revolutionary-general-politico was forced to flee to Spain in 1911, dying there in 1915. Mexican wax cylinders briefly reappeared in EPM from January 1910 to September 1911; then in November 1912 all wax save a few British and European selections were replaced by the new Blue Amberol. A short 1912-13 issue of perhaps less than a hundred 2-minute Mexican Standard Azul(Blue Standard) appears to have died a-borning. The history of both 2- and 4-minute Blue types I must leave to others.
The 1904 through 1909 2-minute Edison Mexican cylinders are a milestone in the history of recorded sound, both in superb technical achievement and in the preservation of a vital culture much of which later would change or be altogether lost. For this reason I hope to publish a full comprehensive study of the subject in future, to which this small essay is but a prelude. Any assistance, especially literature or the records themselves, would be appreciated most deeply.

ARTISTS ON EDISON MEXICAN 2-MIN CYLINDERS. (* = Found on 1904 recordings.)

MALE VOCALISTS:
Jesus Abrego, Tenor.*
José Aguirre, Tenor.*
José Ruiz Becerra, Tenor.*
Rafael Bezares, Tenor.
Pablo García Boril, Tenor.
Francisco Cascales, Tenor,
Francisco "Paco" Cavilanes.
Rafael Hayara Robinson, Tenor.
Adolfo Jiménez, Baritone.
José Torres Ovando, Baritone.
Ismael Ayala, Tenor.
Manuel Rojo, Baritone.
Paco Martinez, Tenor.
José Maria Palma, Poet.
Juan de Dios Peza, Poet.
Miguel Pizacán, Tenor.
Maximiano Rosales, Tenor.
Braulio Rosete, Tenor.

FEMale VOCALISTS:
Srta. Concepción Beraud, Soprano.*
Srta. Sofia Ramacho, Soprano.
W. Delgado, Soprano.
Srta. Esperanza Dimarías, Soprano.
Srta. Beatriz Franco, Mezzo-Soprano.*
Srta. Soledad "Chole" Goyzueta, Soprano.*
Grifessa.
Srta. Pañilde Herrera, Soprano.*
Srta. Esperanza Pastor, Soprano.
Srta. Emilia Sánchez, Soprano.
Srta. Emilia Varela, Soprano.
Srta. María Gómez, Soprano.*
Srta. Emilia Vásquez, Soprano.*
Srta. Modesta Zanudó, Soprano.
Srta. Lérez, Soprano.

INSTRUMENTAL GROUPS:
Banda de Artillería, dir. R. Pacheco.
Banda de Estado Mayor, dir. R. Gacón.
Banda de Policía, dir. y Pr. Présa.
Banda de Zapadores, dir. M. Calderón.*
Orquesta "Typica" Lerdo, cond. M. Contreras.
Quinteto Jorda (*also listed as Quinteto Jorda-Rocabruna) cond. Luis G. Jorda, piano. with José Rocabruna, 1st. violin.

NOTE: An unknown number of cylinders were re-made with same artists, different artists, or different arrangements such as duet instead of solo.

ALL KNOWN 2-MIN. "BLUE STANDARDS" ARE MADE FROM 1904/07/09 MASTERS AS FOLLOWS:

120 18504, 18505, 18506, 18507, 18508, 18509, 18510, 18511, 18512, 18513, 18514, 18515, 18516, 18517, 18518, 18519, 18520, 18522. 18522.

1904 SERIES: 18504-18508, 18505, 18506, 18507, 18508, 18509, 18510, 18511, 18512, 18513, 18514, 18515, 18516, 18517, 18518, 18519, 18520, 18522.
From Pathé’s 1912 phonograph catalogue came this prophetic but premature idea of dual turntables for which specially sequenced sets of discs were offered including more-or-less complete operas which thus could be played without interruption. Broadcast stations would revive the concept many years later. Of extra interest is the use of the phrase “at home” in describing domestic use of the Modèle sans Pavillon (hornless model).