

Review

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David L. Morton Jr. *Sound Recording: The Life History of a Technology*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, xiii + 215 pp. ISBN 0-8018-8398-9.

In *Sound Recording: The Life History of a Technology*, David Morton, an expert in the history of technology and sound recording, presents a social and technical history of (primarily) music recording throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (1857-1992) in the USA and Europe. His chronology starts with the earliest devices (e.g. phono-autographs in France) and culminates in the advent of computer-based technologies. As an early visual aid, a timeline of this progression is included at the outset.

Rather than being a technical field-guide or “how-to” manual for recording, this book is a very readable account of the evolution of recording technologies and, subsequently, the “recording industry.” The technical and scientific aspects underlying specific instruments are discussed throughout; however, technical terms employed are not so onerous as to alienate readers without extensive technical backgrounds. Indeed, a helpful glossary of terms is provided. Similarly, commentaries and details on business, political and bureaucratic aspects of “the industry,” are carefully interwoven in language easily accessible to lay-people. Relevant photographs are included to break up what would otherwise have been a monotony of text, illustrating not only various technologies but also life “back in those days” (e.g. the Dictaphone, p. 47).

The book is divided into seventeen self-contained chapters. Chapter One, entitled “Birth of Recording,” focuses largely on Edison, the inventor of the phonograph. Readers are treated to concisely presented details of Edison’s work life and early inventions, notably, an improved stock ticker and the quadruplex telegraph. His ability to build on existing technologies and the thought progression that led to the invention of the phonograph are quickly but clearly portrayed, setting the tone for how the remainder of the book is written. This chapter is foundational, given that Edison and his inventions figure prominently throughout the next several chapters.

The subsequent sixteen chapters concentrate on what Morton advances as technological milestones in recording history; for instance, the development of early commercial sound recorders, discs, the “talkies” (motion pictures with sound), Hi-Fi recording and the more recent emergence of digital formats. Along the way, readers can note the gradual corporatization of the industry as the focus shifts from discussion of personal histories and individual inventors to that of

company names and brands. Each chapter serves as a miniature time capsule of specific junctures in sound recording history and the discussion of the advent of stereophonic recording (*cf.* monaural and binaural recording) neatly explicates the associated technical and social concerns and issues (ch. 13). For example, Morton notes the necessity of convincing consumers that compared to monaural recordings stereo recordings were more realistic and therefore better. This of course directly impacted sales of new equipment by exciting those who wanted (and could afford) to replicate the concert hall experience in their homes. The debate on whether stereophony was realism or illusion raged amongst industry insiders, although there was agreement that it had a pleasing effect and obviously consumers were convinced.

Juxtaposition of technological advances on one hand, with social, business and political events on the other, provides a glimpse of the multiple and reciprocal forces attendant on technology and society, clearly demonstrating their interrelationship. To wit, the push by manufacturers and the music industry to put technology and music into the hands of the public brought about unintended consequences such as music piracy, against which the same industry had to employ technological, legal, and social (marketing) tactics. At the end of the book, Morton provides a glossary of terms for the uninitiated (or for those who simply need a refresher) followed by a useful bibliography and list of online resources.

Again, while this is not a definitive sourcebook, it succeeds in providing, as its author hoped, a “big picture” view of recording history “accessible to a broad readership” (p. x), and is a solid basis for further inquiry into the socio-historical aspects of sound recording. I recommend it primarily for social or technology historians and secondarily for those who have a general interest in this area. Oral historians, while not directly served by this book’s focus, can derive some satisfaction from noting that the tools they now use were birthed from an almost universal passion to capture and transmit sound (music and spoken word). Technology changes, but not the perhaps unconscious desire to record history.