Expanding and Dominating Through Phonography: Fascist Italy and the Colonisation of East Africa

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This article aims to contribute to a better understanding of the political functions and agentivity of phonography in a totalitarian state.[1] In particular, it focuses on the recorded sound propaganda deployed to support the preparation and conduct of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (October 1935-May 1936), as well as its colonisation and the foundation of Italian East Africa (1936-1941). These episodes are still relatively unstudied from the perspective of the political history of sound media, although they represent a promising area for research. The brutal conquest and appropriation of new strategic spaces for Italian Fascism is associated with ongoing work on the sonic representation of identities and their imaginary. Focusing on the symbolic and practical support that phonography provides to fascist colonial policies, this article will therefore consider this sound medium as a tool of expansion and domination through the manipulation of identities – whether that of the figure of the 'Ethiopian Other' or that of the Italians (colonists) themselves – both represented by sound recordings, creating the figure of what I call a 'phonographic Other', here confronted with a 'phonographic Self'. On the one hand, I will investigate the role of phonography in the realisation of fascist imperialism, and, on the other, I will attempt to better understand its political functioning through the examination of the relations of subjectivation (or

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identification) it seems to anticipate between listeners and the figures represented by sound recordings.

The phonograph was imagined as a political tool right from its social beginnings in 1878. Cylinders, and especially records, were increasingly used over the following decades to popularise political songs and speeches, mediatising representations of people governed by, or supposed to support, political projects.[2] At political rallies in Europe and the USA in the early twentieth century, they were used to enhance militant mobilisation through the creation of an adequate acoustic environment and the management of audience attention, made possible by the alternance of music and speeches (with programmes allowing for focused and distracted listening, with material ranging from speeches to political anthems).[3] In the domestic sphere, these same records, played by a talking machine or broadcast on the radio, were part of a daily, intimate propaganda regime, patiently shaping the political imaginaries of its audiences in order to reinforce their militant commitment or win their consent to a government's ideology and actions.[4]

As we shall see, the political uses of phonography originate from its capacity to produce political territories through the broadcasting of sound representations of partisan or popular figures. This capacity itself stems from phonography's early role as a mediator in colonial and neo-colonial strategies of exploration, appropriation, and exploitation of coveted territories for military, political, and/or commercial purposes. From the 1900s onwards – in other words,

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[2] Richard Bauman and Patrick Feaster, 'Oratorical Footing in a New Medium: Recordings of Presidential Campaign Speeches, 1896-1912', *Texas Linguistic Forum* 47 (2003): 1-19. Available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242078018_Oratorical_Footing_in_a_New_Medium_Recordings_of_Presidential_Campaign_Speeches_1896-1912], accessed on 06/19/2024.

[3] See Jonathan Thomas, *Le disque politique en France (1929-1939)* (Presses universitaires de Rennes, forthcoming 2026); Serge Tchakhotine, *Le viol des foules par la propagande politique* (Gallimard, 1952), 353.

[4] See Jonathan Thomas, 'Bringing Propaganda into the Everyday: The Politicization of the Phonograph Record from Its Origins to the SERP, 1888–2000', in *Everyday Political Objects. From the Middle Ages to the Contemporary World*, ed. Christopher Fletcher (Routledge, 2021), 219–236, https://doi:10.4324/9781003147428-13.

from the very beginnings of the phonographic industry – record companies launched expeditions all over the world to collect the sounds of local cultures, as conceived by the recording scouts, usually without paying the musicians they recorded, thus establishing a neo-colonial relationship of domination with them.[5] The coloniality of phonography is inscribed in the very material – shellac – of most records produced between the early 1900s and the late 1940s. An insect-derived plastic material produced in India and used for centuries, shellac was imported to the West via the colonial trade network from the early seventeenth century onwards. It was used for craft and then industrial purposes unrelated to its original uses, including gramophone manufacturing.[6] At the end of the nineteenth century, phonography also served Western imperialism, whether in Africa, as we will see later, or in Australia. There, it enabled colonisation by sound, replacing the indigenous territories' characteristic sounds with those of the settlers who appropriated them.[7]

The political and colonial uses of phonography initiated by or in the context of the Italian Fascist regime were therefore nothing new. They were, however, original in that they were used for the first time by a totalitarian regime that sought to regenerate its people through the mythical past of the Roman Empire, and to conduct a permanent anthropological revolution, giving a particular hue to the practices and imaginations of military, political, and racial domination in the process of colonisation. Although Italian phonography was less developed at the beginning of the twentieth century than in most other Western countries, it was not

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[5] Sergio Ospina Romero, 'Recording Studios on Tour: Traveling Ventures at the Dawn of the Music Industry,' in *Phonographic Encounters. Mapping Transnational Cultures of Sound, 1890–1945*, eds. Elodie A. Roy and Eva Moreda Rodríguez (Routledge, 2022), 17-9, 25, 30-35.

[6] Elodie A. Roy, *Shellac in Visual and Sonic Culture. Unsettled Matter* (Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 39-98.

[7] See Renée Altergott, 'Samori Touré and the Portable God: Imagining the Phonographic Conquest of West Africa', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 3-4 (2022): 151-69, https://doi:10.1353/ncf.2022.0008; Henry, 'Settler Colonial Soundscapes. Phonograph Demonstrations in 1890s Australia', in *Phonographic Encounters. Mapping Transnational Cultures of Sound, 1890–1945*, eds. Elodie A. Roy and Eva Moreda Rodríguez (Routledge, 2022), 60-77.

ignored by the Fascist regime, which used it as a means of renovating school teaching, tracked down and destroyed records identified as subversive, and made the Italianisation of recorded sound a central objective in line with its increasingly important cultural and political role.[8] This reached its first peak in the mid-1930s, as Italy was preparing for the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, and subsequently during the establishment of the short-lived Italian Empire and Italian East Africa. Sound recordings of war propaganda songs, but also of music and languages from colonised territories, were produced both to disseminate and control the imaginary of a phonographic Other targeted by Fascist war and colonial policy.

Propaganda songs and colonial sound recordings constitute here two distinct repertoires in support of Fascist imperialism. The former, composed by Italian songwriters and composers, is a musical expression of the expansionist agenda through war and colonisation. As a selection of colonised music and musicians, the latter is linked to cultural and territorial appropriation and domination. Both were published by the Italian subsidiaries of major international record labels, such as *La Voce del Padrone* (His Master's Voice, hereafter LVDP), Columbia, and Odeon, or by Italian companies, such as Fonit or Cetra, the latter having been founded in 1933 by the EIAR (*Ente italiano per le audizioni radiofoniche*), the institution in charge of Fascist radio broadcasts. Some of the propaganda songs widely broadcast on the radio or played on the gramophone at home, such as *Faccetta nera* (Little Black Face), were very popular, and remain to this day emblems of the racism and inhumanity of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. This repertoire, as well as the making of colonial sound recordings, has been the subject of recent scholarly research shedding light on

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[8] Benedetta Zucconi, *Coscienza fonografica. La rifflessione sul suono registrato nell'Italia del primo Novecento* (Orthotes, 2018), 7; Jonathan Thomas, 'Perpetuating Fascism: Propaganda and the Temporality of Phonography', forthcoming.

the long-neglected sonic dimension of colonial racism within Italian history.[9] Isabella Abbonizio discusses the use of recorded and broadcast music by the regime to reinforce its colonial policies.[10] 'Listening to colonialism', a research project launched in 2022 by Gianpaolo Chiriacò and Emilio Tamburini, aims to decolonise sound archives by deciphering the racist and essentialist meanings of the lyrics and music of propaganda songs, and investigating the origins, formatting, and cultural transmission of recordings from the colonies.[11]

I draw on this research and on a set of primary sources from Italian state archives and the press to interrogate the political agentivity of phonography through its mediality, which, on the one hand, nourished an imagination of the identity of modern Western power at the origin of colonial representations, and, on the other, enabled the practices of colonial expansion and domination produced by the Fascist regime. Firstly, I will introduce the notion of 'phonographic Other' to designate the representations of the Other produced by phonography. These representations are central to colonial and Fascist propaganda through sound, but also more broadly to the work of mediation and the constitution, or cultivation, of imaginaries that are enabled through phonography, helping achieve commercial as well as political goals. Then, I will show how representations of technical sound devices contribute to defining Italian identity as that of a powerful, modernist civilisation, sharply contrasting with the identity of the African Other shaped by racism. I will then place this galvanised Italian identity in dialogue with the symbolic and practical uses of phonography as a means

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[9] Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, 'D'une persécution l'autre : racisme colonial et antisémitisme dans l'Italie fasciste', *Revue d'Histoire Moderne & Contemporaine* 3 (2008): 120, https://doi:10.3917/rhmc.553.0116; Rosetta Giuliani Caponetto, *Facist Hybridities. Representations of Racial Mixing and Diaspora Cultures under Mussolini* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 16.

[10] See Isabella Abbonizio, 'Musica e colonialismo nell'Italia fascista (1922-1943)' (PhD diss., Università degli studi di Roma 'Tor Vergata', 2009).

[11] See 'Listening to Italian Colonialism', https://emiliotamburini.cargo.site/Listening-to-Italian-Colonialism, accessed December 5, 2023.

of colonial expansion, notably through the songs of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Finally, I will address the colonial recordings that followed the advent of the Italian Empire as means of asserting and dominating the reified, racialised figure of an 'African Other'.

A Phonographic Other

Phonography, understood as a set of sociotechnical devices and practices, does not only encompass the shaping, recording, and broadcasting of sound, i.e. the configuration and realisation of a perceptual and often affective event, but also the mediation of sonic 'Others'. Whether vocal or instrumental, the sonic recording of a person offers a representation of that person, whether he or she has freely chosen to emit these sounds or has been forced to do so. Recordings produce in listeners representations of a phonographic Other, which are formed in relation to the mental pictures the listener already has and wishes to associate with what he or she hears. Accordingly, such representations of the Other derive as much from the sounds that have been chosen and shaped by the producers (in the broadest sense of the term) of a recording, as from the individual and cultural being of the listener who may love, hate, admire, or depreciate that sonic Other. Finally, the phonographic Other can be caught up in a process of identification engaged in by its listener, at the end of which the latter fantasises the phonographic Other as a phonographic Self. These figures can, of course, be those of recorded singers, musicians, or speakers, but they can also be any person or group evoked by sound without having been directly recorded.

Such an account seems to contradict the discourses that describes phonography as the media of 'sonic fidelity', i.e. of unmediated reproductions of sonic reality, not to say of reality

itself.[12] A commercial argument and the object of a quest that has guided the technical evolution of phonography and sustained its market, sonic fidelity, and thus the existence of recordings that would be true samples of reality, are today considered mythical objects imbued with a certain social romanticism that needs to be deconstructed.[13] Rather than 'mirrors' of the real that no mediation has corrupted, they are technical constructions whose assemblage depends on the material capacities, skills, and intentions of their producer. They are therefore mediators themselves produced by a whole range of mediations.

The concept of the 'phonographic Other' contributes to the demystification of sonic fidelity by suggesting that recording may be more than a construction of reality: rather, it constitutes the equally illusory or even fallacious construction of an Other who can mediate the intentions of its producer to act in the social, commercial, or political field. This participation is only possible insofar as sonic fidelity and the phonographic Other induce the same consequences on the listening, reception, and social effects of a recording: it can be listened to as the true manifestation of a thing or a person, received as an element of knowledge about that thing or person, and circulated within different social groups as a reliable part of the substance of that thing or person. In a word, the critical consideration of sonic fidelity and the phonographic Other allows us to think about the naturalisation of representations constructed by phonographic operators to achieve particular goals. As it concerns the representation of human figures that political projects must win, govern, or fight, the concept of phonographic Other helps us investigate in depth the political functioning of phonography when it is used for propaganda purposes.

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[12] Emily Thompson, 'Machines, Music, and the Quest for Fidelity: Marketing the Edison Phonograph in America, 1877–1925;. *Musical Quarterly* 79 (1995): 131–71.

[13] See Élizabeth Giuliani, 'La réception du media', *Revue de la BNF* 33 (2009): 9-19, https://doi:10.3917/rbnf.033.0009 ; Patrick Feaster, "The Following Record': Making Sense of Phonographic Performance, 1877-1908' (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2007), 31; Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past. Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Duke University Press, 2003), 282-86.

Within this frame, the phonographic Other mediates a political conception of the world embodied in sounds that convey the presence of a political entity valorised by propaganda – e.g., the voice of an orator or those of a communist amateur choir that single-handedly embodies the proletariat – or that signifies admiration (here, the valorised phonographic Other could then be perceived as a photographic Self), hatred.[14] In all cases, this phonographic Other is caught between the communicative intentions behind its fashioning, and the consumption its audiences will make of it, the latter reinforcing its naturalisation, and thus its political efficiency. In this way, the phonographic Other functions as a generator and regulator of the emotions and imaginary surrounding the entities – speakers, peoples, social classes, representatives of a 'race', etc. – that are either explicitly or implicitly present in the recording. According to the producers of these phonographic Others, their exploitation is supposed to help the realisation of political projects.

On a theoretical level, by asserting its veracity with every listen, the phonographic Other blocks the imagination at its origin and presents itself as an unquestionable nature. In the context of colonial propaganda, it helps assert the ideological view that the specific qualities of peoples who are to be colonised (or are already colonised) justify colonisation, for example, by asserting their natural alienation or inferiority. To reflect on the practical accuracy of this hypothesis, it is useful to articulate the notion of phonographic Other in relation to that of 'performative fidelity', which Patrick Feaster proposes for the phonographic field, 'as the extent to which the socially situated playback of an indexically recorded action is accepted as doing whatever the original would have done in the same context'.[15] He takes

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[14] See Richard Bauman, 'Projecting Presence. Aura and Oratory in Williams Jennings Bryan's Presidential Races', in *Scale: Discourse and Dimension of Social Life*, eds. E. Summerson Carr and Michael Lempert (University of California Press, 2016), 25-51; https://doi:10.1515/9780520965430-004; Jonathan Thomas, *Le disque politique en France (1929-1939)*.

[15] Patrick Feaster, "Rise and Obey the Command': Performative Fidelity and the Exercise of Phonographic Power;, *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24 (2012-3): 358.

as an example the reaction of a late-nineteenth-century English audience to a recording of their national anthem, a reaction in line with that which any live performance of the anthem would produce. In this way, performative fidelity leads to social fidelity.[16] This somewhat limits the relevance of the articulation between phonographic Other and performative fidelity, which would only be useful in the case where this Other would itself signify or incite the realisation of social facts such as practices, rituals, or behaviours, which would be disseminated as widely as possible amongst a population. However, the social fidelity that would derive from a phonographic Other and its false nature sheds a little more light on its manipulative nature, since it would serve to induce social facts that would be the direct consequences of its construction as the mediator of a political project.

The notion of frames, which Feaster takes from Erving Goffman to bring into the discussion the contexts and situations of a recording's performance, allows us to better evaluate in practice the political power of the phonographic Other, which will only express itself in a frame where it will be received accordingly with the intention behind its construction.[17] For example, a leading orator who appeals for political mobilisation in a recording might indeed produce such behaviour if broadcast as part of a party rally, but provoke mockery if heard elsewhere by an audience of political opponents. However, it should also be noted that it is not uncommon for records to play within the frameworks of certain social practices and fields of activity where political practices are not welcome, such as school education or the transmission of history, to play phonographic Others configured to arouse compassion or admiration despite their criminal past.[18] If the naturalisation of the

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[16] Feaster, "Rise and Obey the Command'. 366.

[17] Feaster, "Rise and Obey the Command", 359.

[18] I am thinking here of French and European historical figures – Louis XVI, Adolf Hitler and members of Nazi institutions, Benito Mussolini, Philippe Pétain, and so on. – represented by records produced by far-right militants. See Jonathan Thomas, 'Portrait du disque en médiateur fluide des cultures politiques;, *Revista de História* 182 (2023): 1-37, https://.doi:10.11606/issn.2316-9141.rh.2023.199775.

figure it embodies is one of the consequences or objectives of the construction of a phonographic Other, its effectiveness remains relative to the willingness of a listener to take it seriously, or at least to allow himself to be seduced by it, until he ends up considering this Other as an 'Other self'.

This last possibility of reception of the phonographic Other resonates with one of the possible futures of records produced in colonised spaces from colonial or neo-colonial structures. Of course, in the context of fascist colonial conquests, any identification of an Italian listener with a phonographic Other representing an Ethiopian Other would constitute an unacceptable transgression of the political and racial barrier separating them, which would drastically limit this possibility. But Michael Denning has also shown how the recordings, often of dance music, that were circulated in the world's colonial ports by major record companies (looking to renew and diversify their repertoire through the circuits of colonial capitalism), ultimately encouraged the emergence of decolonisation movements through the circulation and recognition of national cultural signs.[19] Listened to in the setting of a Western home, café, or dance hall, these records may have appealed to music lovers or dancers who pictured a phonographic Other whose interest was as much rooted in its exoticism as in its musicality and ability to elicit a dance, i.e., to confirm the performative fidelity of a dance recording. But elsewhere, in the cities or countries where the recorded musicians and their cultures lived, the phonographic Others they conjured up, and which would have motivated decolonisation movements, became phonographic Selves. It is probably at this tipping point, which fully illustrates the operative versatility of phonography, that it exists or does not exist as a performing medium, with the colonial dimension being a significant part of its production.

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[19] See Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution* (Verso, 2015).

We will now see that the assembling of phonographic Others, mostly African, in the context of Fascist Italy's conquest of Ethiopia, was part of an older imaginary identity, made present by representations in which colonial domination was mediated by the power attributed to technical objects embodying sonic modernity.

Italians as Settlers: An Identity Asserted by Sound Technologies

Italian colonial expansion in Africa began in 1869, at Assab (Eritrea), whence Italy attempted to extend into East Africa, notably Abyssinia and Tigray, where Italian troops successfully defended the fort of Mekelle in January 1896 against the army of Ethiopia's *negusse negest* Menelik II (1844-1913) but lost the first Italo-Ethiopian War a few weeks later at the battle of Adua. Meanwhile, a protectorate was established in Somalia in 1889. In 1911, Italy also took Tripolitania and Cyrenaica from the Ottoman Empire, creating Italian Libya and reinforcing a much smaller colonial space than either France or Britain. During the First World War, Italy, which had initially declared itself neutral, committed itself against Germany and Austria-Hungary in exchange for the promise of major territorial gains in Europe. After victory, these promises were not kept. A source of immense frustration, this mutilated victory, as the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio (1963-1938) who was close to the fascist movement, put it, had a profound effect on Italian national sentiment and fostered the birth of the Fascist movement in 1919. It is hardly surprising, then, that from the start of the Fascist era, Mussolini sought to assert Italy's status as a European superpower through a colonial policy targeting the Mediterranean basin and East Africa, and then creating a new Empire.[20]

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[20] See Robert Mallett, *Mussolini in Ethiopia, 1919–1935: The Origins of Fascist Italy's African War* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1-32; Aristotle A. Kallis, *Fascist Ideology. Territory and Expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922-1945* (Routledge, 2000), 122-23.

Italian interest for Africa was accompanied by the dissemination of racist representations of the African Other. As reconstructions of an otherness based on the identity and cultural terms of those who conceive and use them, these depictions function as safe spaces where it becomes possible to enter into contact with the Other in order to establish a relationship of domination.[21] In such a context, modern technical objects including radios and gramophones are mobilised to assert the domination of the Western civilisations that created them over African societies by beating them on the terrain, supposedly theirs, of orality. Such objects therefore accompanied colonisation and probably regulated the type of relations that colonists could, wanted, or were going to have with the colonised populations. In Fascist Italy, they were part of a propaganda campaign asserting the superiority of Italians over Africans. They also served to maintain public opinion in favour of colonisation and to adapt Mussolini's colonial policy to current events. From this perspective, it is worth noting that sound devices and their imaginaries were articulated to pre-existing racist representations of the African Other and showed technically mediatised sound as a means of domination.

A weekly program of the EIAR and a vehicle for Fascist propaganda, *Radiocorriere*, initially *Radiorario*, published numerous advertisements for loudspeakers, radios, gramophones, and radiogramophones from the second half of the 1920s. I have selected three that illustrate in striking and significant ways how sound devices fashioned the colonial Imagination of the African Other. Especially the first two show, through their characteristically racist mode of representation, sound devices as the unexpected embodiment of an Imagination of the Italian civilisational domination over members of African peoples reduced to powerlessness or devotion.

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[21] Giuliani Caponetto, *Facist Hybridities,* 9.

Dating from 1926, the first (ill. 1) promotes a loudspeaker manufactured by Safar, one of Italy's leading companies in this field. It depicts a black African man prostrated before the device. As he is crowned with feathers, this man may be the leader of a people, a figure of power that becomes subjugated by the power of Italian technology and modernity. During the interwar period in Europe, the sonic power of loudspeakers was often equated with power itself and used as a symbolic means of asserting the power of political parties, or as a practical means of subjecting an audience to the sounds of a totalitarian regime.[22] In both cases, the technical power of the device is the source of its sonic power, showing it to be a miracle of human genius, and ultimately giving it its charisma. It should then be noted that this technical power, which also embodies a superhuman mastery of the ordinarily elusive sound, is attributed in other colonial contexts to other sound devices to express the same dominating charisma. Renée Altergott shows how, in late nineteenth-century France, the phonograph was imagined across the press and record catalogues as a 'portable god' that fascinated African kings and won their allegiance to the French settlers.[23] Sound devices can therefore generally be seen not only as instruments of leisure, information, or education, but also of colonial conquest.

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[22] Jonathan Thomas, 'Le paradoxe du "haut-parleur": violence sonore et pratiques politiques dans la France de l'entre-deux guerres', in *Penser le son, entendre l'inouï. Esthétique et politique de la modernité sonore*, ed. Céline Hervet (Classiques Garnier, 2023), 221-243, https://doi:10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-14980-4.p.0221; Jens Gerrit Papenburg, 'Pleasure and Pain with Amplified Sound. A Sound and Music History of Loudspeaker Systems in Germany, ca. 1930', in *Techniques of Hearing. History, Theory, and Practices*, eds. Michael Schillmeier, Robert Stock and Beate Ochsner (Routledge, 2023), 36-46.

[23] Altergott, 'Samori Touré and the Portable God', 152-57.

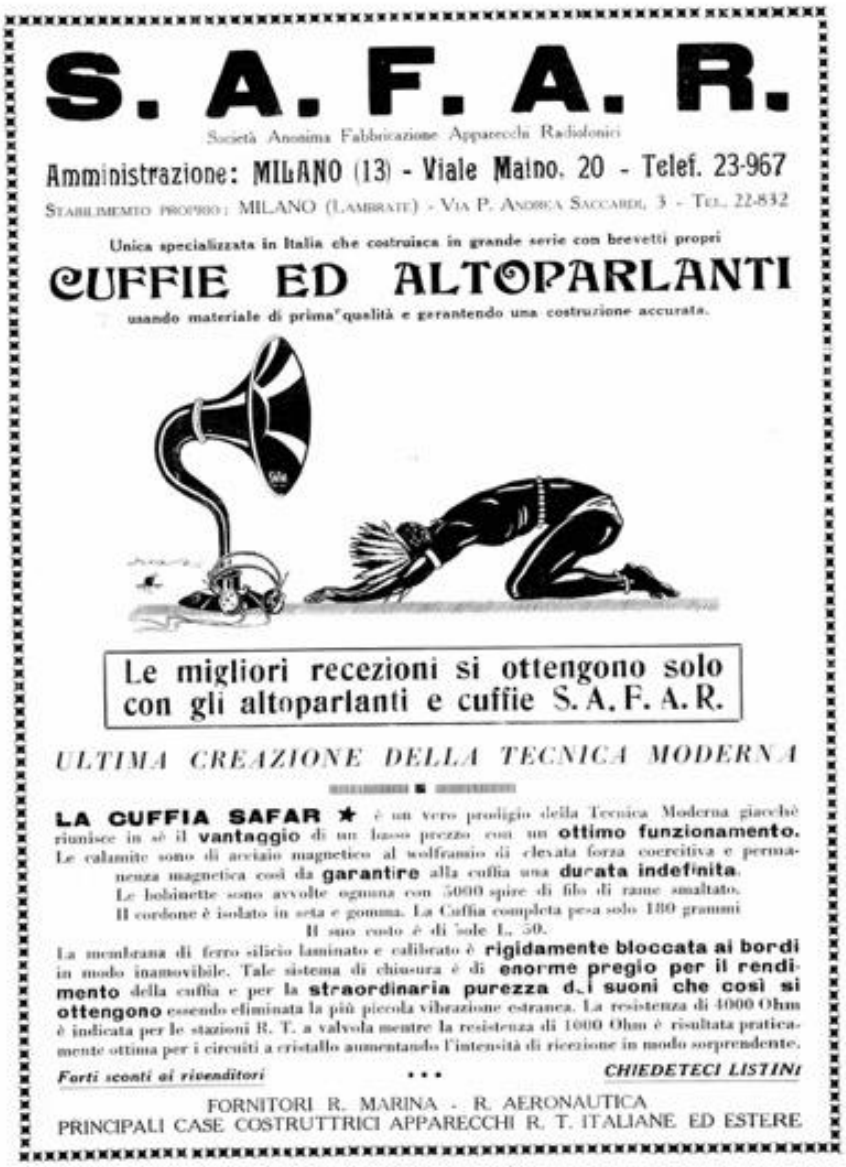

Illustration 1: *Radiorario* (March 21, 1926), no page number.

Source: http://www.radiocorriere.teche.rai.it

Another feature is illustrated by a 1929 advertisement for the Roman brand Nora-Radio (ill. 2), revealing the silhouettes of two nude black women carrying a radio across a stage as if dancing in sync. Around them, a dark background is streaked with lines and dotted with lightning bolts and stars. This is probably air, the medium in which radio transmits and receives sound and manifests its magic, approaching the cosmogonic and perhaps divine

powers represented by the lightning and stars. The two women's dance step is perhaps a ritual celebration of radio and its technical power. If this hypothesis holds true, these women's devotion to an Italian sound device is a racist representation of what is seemingly conceived as African backwardness. Their nudity can also be interpreted as another way of representing their backwardness and submission, as it refers to the sexualisation of African women depicted by Italian explorers and settlers since the late nineteenth century.

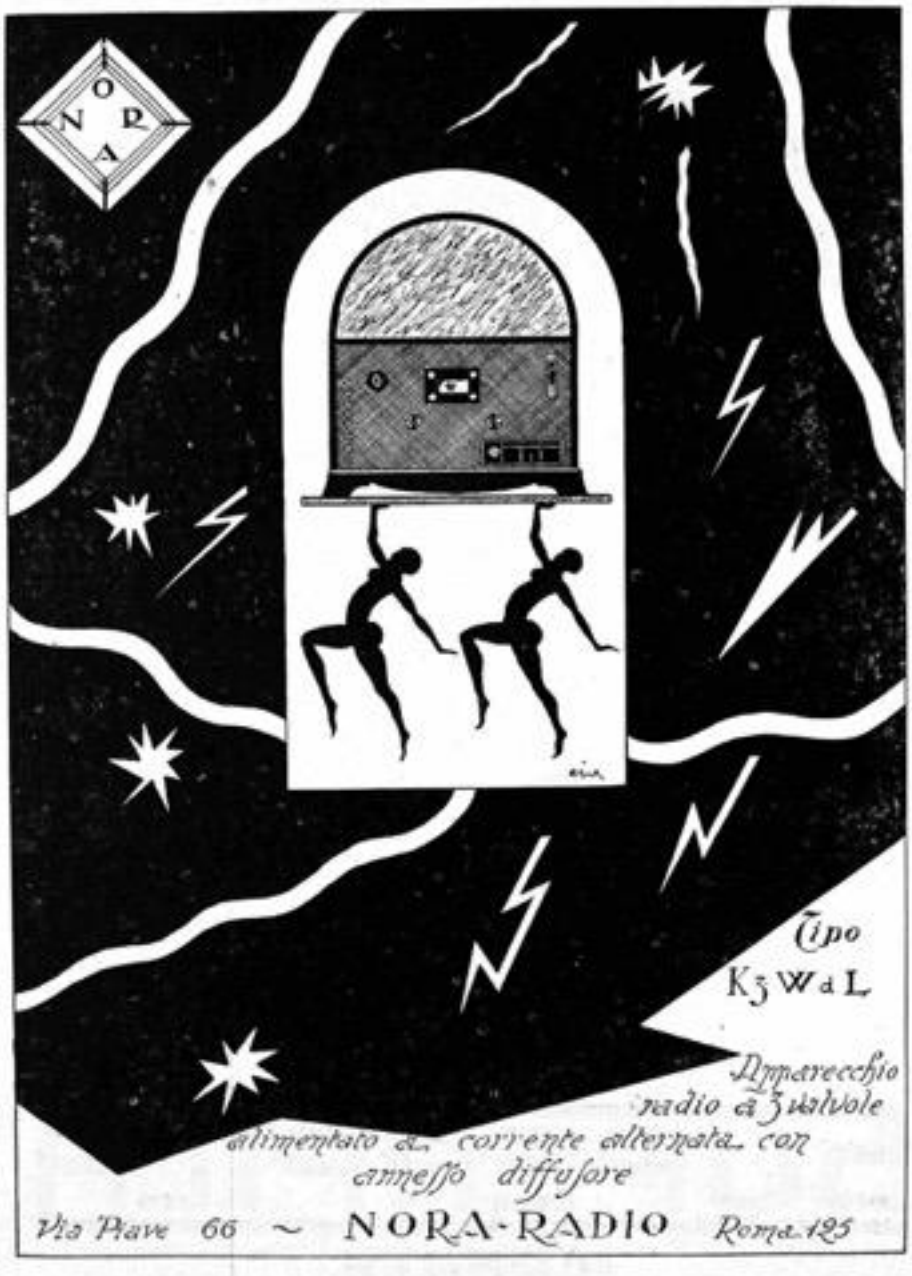

Illustration 2: *Radiorario* (November 17, 1929): 40. Source: http://www.radiocorriere.teche.rai.it

Another way of galvanising Italian identity through the racist representation of the backwardness of African peoples can be found in a third publication. In 1931, the article 'All'ombra delle piramidi' (In the shadow of the pyramids), written by *Radiocorriere'*s correspondent in Egypt, referred to the creation of radio broadcasts for the tens of thousands of Italians living in that country. It was accompanied by a painting signed by A. Bologna (ill. 3), dated *Anno IX* (Year 9), following Fascist dating conventions. In the foreground, in the desert, Westerners (probably Italians) can be seen dressed in suits and shirts and wearing hats and sitting relaxed, listening to the radio in front of a car. In the background, white-clad camel-drivers ride their animals, a sign of their belonging to a traditional society. The Italian technical modernity and Western comfort embodied by the radio and the automobile contrast with the lack of technicality and roughness characterising traditional Egyptian society and its means of moving through the desert, i.e. to explore, possess and civilise it. Such a visual disparity is meant to reveal the backwardness of Egyptian society and, by extension, of societies throughout Africa. In the context of Italian Libya in the late 1930s, Abbonizio also notes that radio broadcasting of the sounds of Arab and Jewish folk traditions gave them a similar image. Radio was thus the agent of a colonisation that relied on technical modernity to signify the civilisational gulf separating settlers and settled, and to propose bridging it by virtue of Italy's self-assigned mission to civilise the peoples of its colonies.[24]

[24] François Dumasy, 'Le fascisme est-il un 'article d'exportation'? Idéologie et enjeux sociaux du Parti National Fasciste en Libye pendant la colonisation italienne', *Revue d'Histoire Moderne & Contemporaine* 3 (2008): 97, https://doi:10.3917/rhmc.553.0085.

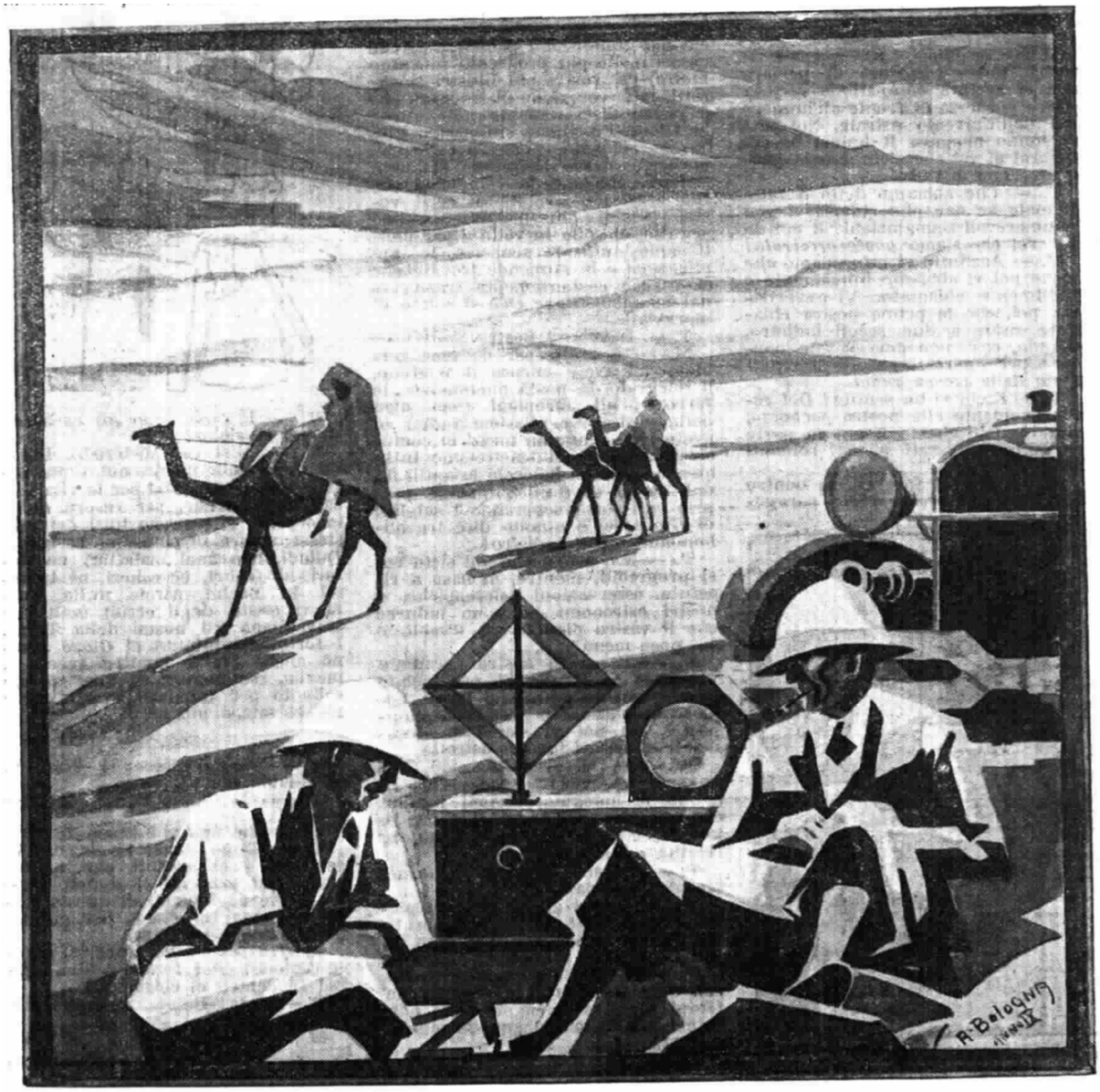

Illustration 3: A. Bologna, *Radiocorriere* (March 14, 1931): 11. Source: http://www.radiocorriere.teche.rai.it

The gramophone, too, asserted itself as an object of modern life from the mid-1930s, when phonography finally began to be considered an object of cultural debate in Italy.[25] Rosetta Giuliani Caponetto notes that, in a scene from the 1936 propaganda film *Lo*

[25] Benedetta Zucconi, 'Phonographic Awareness'. Recorded Sound in Early Twentieth-Century Italy Between Aesthetic Questions and Economic Struggles', in *Phonographic Encounters. Mapping Transnational Cultures of Sound, 1890–1945*, eds. Elodie A. Roy and Eva Moreda Rodríguez (Routledge, 2022), 160.

Squadrone Bianco (The White Squadron) set in Italian Libya, the device constitutes, along with the airplane beside which it is placed, one of the few visible signs of modernity.[26] The articulation between the signs of technical modernity and the African space coveted by Fascist Italy also appears in a short text written in 1934 by Vittorio Beonio-Brocchieri (1902-1979) and published by the phonographic magazine *Il Disco*. The journalist and aviator, who would later join the Regia Aeronautica in the Ethiopian War, combines the recorded sound of gramophone records with his own aesthetic experience of the landscapes of East and Equatorial Africa. Indeed, Beonio-Brocchieri confessed to taking a gramophone on board at the expense of other important luggage, in order to listen, at each stopover, to records encapsulating the spirit of the places he was about to fly over in his personal aircraft:

> So I'll tell you that I measured out the musical drug according to a precise criterion, proportioning it to the setting of the different scenes, to the mood of the different moments. Before flying off across the Somali desert, Pastorale from the *6th Symphony*. At the Bender Cassim stopover '...', a Bach *Prelude*. In Mombasa, under the waterspouts of the equatorial deluge, Mascagni's *Ode to the Sun*. Across the mountains of Kilimanjaro and Kenya, I stored up sensations that made me savor with redoubled intensity the Wagnerian page from Walhalla, which I had rolling on the pivot of the magic box as soon as I set the wheels of the camera down on the field of Kisumu, on the shores of Lake Victoria.[27]

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[26] Giuliani Caponetto, *Fascist Hybridities*, 108.

[27] Vittorio Beonio-Brocchieri, 'Confessione', *Il Disco* (February 1934): 2-3.

Considering this practice from a colonial historical perspective, listening to these pieces of recorded music in this way appears to be a way of disguising African spaces with an aesthetic that is foreign to them, while ignoring the sound aesthetics they already host. These spaces are thus subjected to symbolic, cultural, and political colonisation. Jean-Sebastien Bach and Ludwig van Beethoven represent two absolute and indisputable standards of Western music. Composer Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945), famous for his operas that were particularly popular in Italy, such as *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1889) and *L'Amico Fritz* (1891), was notoriously close to Benito Mussolini[28], and Adolf Hitler's taste for the works of Richard Wagner is already well known[29]. The pieces chosen are, therefore, strong signifiers of a high Western culture sharing close affinities with the fascist regimes. This practice of imaginary colonisation also illustrates the agentivity of recorded sound and its technical objects as political actors of memory. Beonio-Brocchieri does not cover up the African spaces he flies over with the sounds of his gramophone; he listens to them on the ground and remembers them in flight. By conjuring up their memory at just the right moment, he nurtures his imaginary relationship with Africa as a land he feels close to and that he might want to make his own, since it resonates with his aesthetic tastes, which have Western, fascist, and even colonial connotations.

But sound recording also changes modern life by generating a new form of memory: an acoustic memory. The colonisation of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania led to the recording of several records. Published in the very last years of the 1890s, one of the oldest is the speech given by Colonel Giuseppe Galliano (1846-1896) at the Fort of Mekelle, probably in 1895 or 1896, and which *La Stampa* opportunely recalled in November 1935, when the Italian army

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[28] Fiamma Nicolodi, *Musica e musicisti nel ventennio fascista* (Discanto, 1984), 40-57.

[29] Laure Schnapper, "Degenerate" Music in Nazi Germany', *Raisons politiques* 14 (2004): 157-177.

took the town.[30] Two other records were also released in 1912 by the Gramophon Company, with the anthem *Tripoli Italia* sung by the '*La Patria*' (The Fatherland) choir, or the songs *Frin-Frin-Tobrouk (canzonetta della nostalgia),* and *A Tripoli* sung by the *canzonettista* De Nardis.[31] In its 1928 catalogue, the French company Pathé lists six records containing historical sound reconstructions of events marking the conquest of Libya, as well as the crushing defeat – the first for a Western army – of Italian troops at Adua in 1896.[32] Phonography is a means of disseminating a prestigious colonial memory, that of the successful Libyan conquest, but also an unfortunate one, that of the Ethiopian defeat, through the reconstructed and therefore falsified sound of history. Pride and resentment are intertwined, fuelling a feeling of revenge that will, in turn, fuel the Second Italo-Ethiopian War – a war whose immediate preparation will bring phonography into play, no longer to work on memory, but to represent Italian expansion and the modalities of its realisation.

Expansion: Disseminating a Phonographic Other to Conquer and 'Civilise'

Describing what she calls 'phonographic imperialism', Renée Altergott explores the political imagination of phonography in France at the time of the scramble for Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, which gave recorded voices the power to enchant and subdue 'indigenous' listeners.[33] This imagination probably still operated in the context of the Italian colonisation of Ethiopia four decades later. An advertisement for an Italian Phonola radiophonograph, published two months after the start of the war, shows the photographed faces of two black

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[30] 'Discorso del ten. col. Galliano al Forte di Macallè', *La Stampa*, November 8, 1935, p. 3. This recording was published by LVDP in 1936 on a 10 inches shellac record with the title 'Uscita del Ten. Col. Galliano dal Forte di Macallè (22-1-1896) (Prescol, ricostruzione storica) (Riproduzione da disco dell'epoca)' under catalogue number HN 951.

[31] Alan Kelly, *His Master's Voice/La Voce del Padrone. The Italian Catalogue* (Greenwood Press, 1988), 406.

[32] Dischi Pathé, 'Catalogo generale', (1928): 123.

[33] Altergott, 'Samori Touré and the Portable God', 151-3.

children, who can be imagined as Ethiopian and are apparently in a state of exaltation.[34] They also wear the type of hat that might be worn by the *Balilla*, i.e. members of the Fascist youth institution Opera Nazionale Balilla. The slogan announces, 'La voce che esalta e la voce che incanta' (The voice that exalts and the voice that enchants), drawing a striking parallel with what Altergott describes. However, the Fascist regime's use of phonography was not limited to the enslavement of the natives. In the process of Italian expansion, through the phonographic dissemination of an Ethiopian Other and an Italian Self, it was first used to act in preparation for war, then to support military conquest on a symbolic level, using a repertoire designed for the occasion, before being put into practice through a network of media it formed with cinema and radio.

Phonography can be a means of expansion, thanks to its ability to encapsulate and displace acoustic signals in time and space, divorcing them from the place and context in which they originated. Here, this displacement is that of the fascist cultural context and its imagination of the African Other, in that of Ethiopia at war, first in a phantasmatic way, during the preparation of the war, and then in a concrete way, during its unfolding. Displacing the sound signals of cultural and political orthodoxy is more than a means of gaining or boosting popular support for Italian colonial policy or influencing the behaviour of soldiers preparing for war or already in it.

Indeed, such a displacement also allows for the political and cultural meanings of these signs to be injected into Ethiopian society, in an attempt to Italianise and even fascistise it. In December 1935, LVDP issued a series of Christmas records, six of which were presented under the heading 'Natale in Africa' (Christmas in Africa) and included some of the best-known songs in the new propaganda repertoire (*Faccetta nera*; *Ti saluto (vado in*

[34] *Radiocorriere* (December 8, 1935), 1.

Abissinia); *Adua*; *Tarantella Imperiale*; *Chissà il Negus che cosa dirà*...). The distributor offered to send these records to East Africa for 100 lire[35], thus promoting an Italian, fascist celebration of Christmas in a Christian country that already had its own nativity tradition. Another example of expansion through recorded culture can be found in the lyrics of *Din Don Della - La Leggenda del Negus*, a war song from the spring of 1936. Mocking the Ethiopian leader Haile Sellassie, it communicates the fantasy of a LVDP recording studio being set up 'one day or other' in Addis Ababa. A sign of the advanced Italianisation of Ethiopia, Chiriacò saw in this establishment the prospect of producing records of Ethiopian music, to which we could add that of a colonial repertoire produced entirely by the settlers themselves.[36]

[35] *Radiocorriere* (December 15, 1935), 2.

[36] Gianpaolo Chiriacò, 'Abdi's Shop and the Duka Azmari House. Musical Traces of the Italian Colonial Project in Addis Ababa and in Italy', *From the European South* 11 (2022): 55.

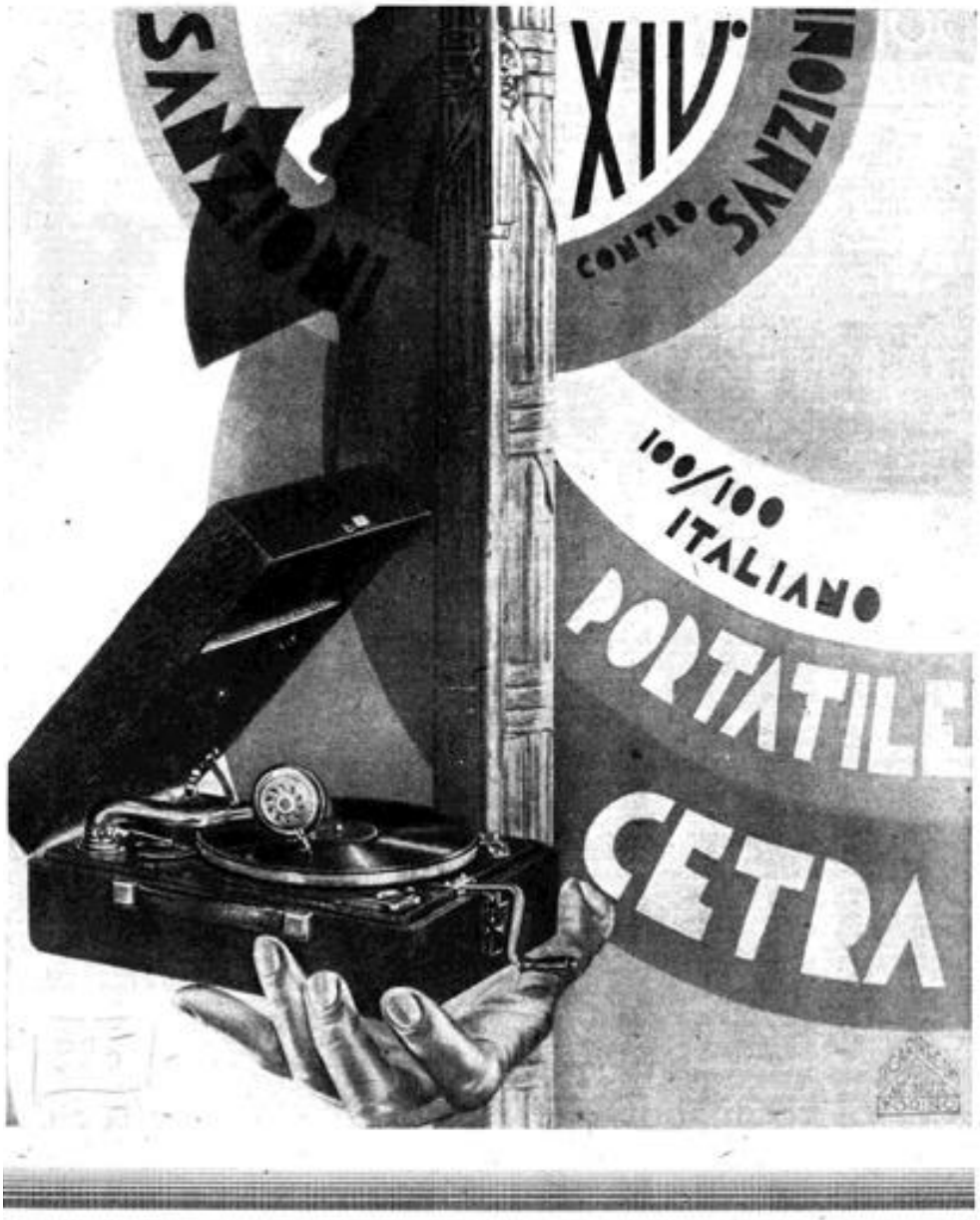

Illustration 4: *Radiocorriere* (May 17, 1936): 17. Source: http://www.radiocorriere.teche.rai.it

The 'Italianness' of phonographic production was also the theme of an advertisement for Cetra (ill. 4). Published shortly after the end of the war, it shows a portable phonograph carried by a huge hand, in front of a *fascio*, the emblem of fascism. Beside it, the Roman numeral XIV marks the fascist year 14 and is surrounded by the words '*Sanzioni contro sanzioni*' (sanctions against sanctions). Further down, it reads '*100% Italiano portatile* Cetra'

(100% Italian portative Cetra). This advertisement refers to the economic sanctions imposed on Italy by the League of Nations following the invasion of Ethiopia, to which the regime responded with a policy of autarky that included an unprecedented effort to Italianise phonography. In this context, the representation of the phonograph as a modern and powerful '100% Italian' object pictured it as a symbol of resistance for the regime against forces challenging its colonial expansion. In doing so, it affirmed the phonograph's symbolic importance as a sign of national greatness, albeit one amongst many, whose specific features guaranteed it a certain visibility. These include not only the portable phonograph's ability to create moments of colonial propaganda anywhere, but also the ability of its medium, the record, to preserve a vast musical repertoire.

The repertoire of Ethiopian war songs and pre-war songs is also a matter of displacement and thus expansion. With over a hundred songs, it began in the summer of 1935, with the song *Serenata a Sellassié* (E.A. Mario).[37] For Chiriacò, these songs 'did not only describe the Ethiopia that soldiers and reporters were supposedly going to experience. They also described what Ethiopia was supposedly going to look like once it had become a colony, as well as the living conditions for Ethiopians once Italy had succeeded in its plan'.[38] Their recordings, conveying instances of Italian phonographic self-declared in the figure of the soldier and the settler, were released by the major record companies (LVDP, Odeon, Columbia, Cetra, Fonit), which issued at least 300 versions (150 records) of these songs.[39] In February 1936, *La Stampa Sera*, the evening edition of *La Stampa*, one of Italy's main daily newspapers, considered that these 'war songs of a people on the march' belonged, like those

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[37] Emanuele Mastrangelo, *I canti del Littorio* (Lo Scarabeo, 2006), 116.

[38] Chiriacò, 'Abdi's Shop and the Duka Azmari House', 55.

[39] This number is based on a non-exhaustive discography of more than 900 records notably compiled from Italian catalogs released between 1925 and 1942.

of the First World War, to Italy's recent history, whose frustrations fuelled its claims to territory and grandeur.[40] In addition to discs and the radio, these songs also circulated via affordable sheet music and were massively disseminated. However, only records could make one of their sonic shapes always present, performed, for example, by a star like Daniele Serra, whose unique intonation is matched by a rich orchestral accompaniment, and recounts with a unique force of conviction and evocation a part of Italian colonial history and imagination. Many of these songs were satirical and expressed the current colonial imagination. For example, the lyrics of *Din Don Della* state: 'I was told of the Negus, that even his wife received a *Faccetta nera* record'.[41] Thus is evoked both the mass distribution of the song and the injection through phonography of the colonial conception of the Ethiopian Other right up to the pinnacle of indigenous power: the wife of the Negus is stripped of her social rank and reduced to the figure of the backward and desirable Ethiopian woman, *Faccetta nera*, promising Abyssinian women liberation from slavery, love, fascistisation, and the Italianisation they will obtain from the settlers.

Phonography is thus imagined here as a means of colonial expansion, through the projection of cultural tablets resulting from the sonic conception of the Other, whose textual and musical parameters have been configured to better capture the attention of listeners and occupy a territory that is first imaginary, then concrete. And this means of expansion is boosted by radio, another means of extraterritorial projection that the regime has been constantly developing since the mid-1920s. In April 1936, an advertisement for Fada radio

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[40] Antonio Barretta, 'Da Addio mia bella, addio… a Faccetta nera. Canzoni di guerra di un popolo in marcia', *La Stampa Sera* (February 1, 1936): 1. The information on these records can be explored online in the following database: Jonathan Thomas, «REDIRE database. Propaganda Sound Recordings of Italian Fascism», https://redire.uni-bonn.de/, accessed on 10/11/2025. This database was created in the framework of the research project REDIRE (see infra, footnote 1, and https://www.musikwissenschaft.uni-bonn.de/forschung/laufende-projekte/redire, accessed on 10/11/2025).

[41] '*M'han detto che del Negus, perfino la mogliera… ha ricevuto un disco con su Facetta Nera*', cited in Mastrangelo, *I canti del Littorio*, 117.

sets and radiophonographs published in the journal *L'Illustrazione Coloniale* illustrated the strategic importance of this projection capability with the slogan: 'Even in the colonies, [Fada sets] victoriously bear the signs of Italy's creative power'.[42]

These signs are those of news bulletins or musical works played live, but also of records. Indeed, while radio and cinema were mass media whose importance was then deemed detrimental to phonography, the latter formed with them a media network whose various components complemented each other to better disseminate propaganda but also nationalised sound and visual cultures. In October 1937, an article in *L'Illustrazione Coloniale* focused on the phonographic industry as a means of national outreach on the 8th Fiera del Levante (Bari, Italy), an important venue for projecting the Italian economy into the Mediterranean area. Firstly, it notes that the Italian phonographic industry had made considerable progress in recent years, thanks to the accelerated spread of music by radio and the popularisation of songs by cinema. Then, noting that many visitors from abroad and the colonies showed their sympathy for 'national production' by visiting the stand selling records by the major Italian brand Fonit, the article stressed the high technical and artistic quality of these records, offering:

> first-rate singers, renowned soloists, renowned orchestras with renowned conductors and charismatic orchestras, [and] include[ing] everything that enthusiasts can appreciate: opera, symphonic music, romances, solos and concertos for piano, violin and accordion, miscellaneous music, patriotic hymns, modern and old-time dances, songs and a complete assortment of songs and sound film motifs. The company also

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[42] '*Anche in colonia portano vittoriosamente i segni della potenza creatice d'Italia*', cited in *L'Illustrazione Coloniale. Rassegna d'Espansione Italiana* (April, 1936): 4.

deals in the sale of portable phonographs of the highest sound quality, which are no less valuable than the records.[43]

Phonography, as a means of expansion through its capacity to create recordings, thus makes it possible to meld together two times and two rhetorical identities of Italy, i.e. phonography generates here acoustic archives that are at once real and imaginary, showing Italianness as simultaneously timeless and in the making. On the one hand, the propaganda repertoire, often classed as 'current events records' by the general and specialised press, is an archival ensemble of the immediate, a short-term memory of politicised commentaries on the war, sung and therefore aestheticised, made unique by their recording. This repertoire, designed specifically for colonial fascist engineering, is made even more alive by radio broadcasting, the medium of the live event. On the other hand, the discographic repertoire of Italian excellence helps to disseminate another instance of the phonographic Self and expresses, notably through operas and patriotic hymns, a cultural norm that legitimates colonial expansion by expressing the historical and national depth of Italian identity (i.e. here its capacity for symbolic domination). In the late 1930s, this cultural and political technique of national, even imperial, representation was applied by the fascist regime to Libyan, Somali, and Ethiopian music. It became a technique of colonial domination.

Domination

Once territories have been colonised, phonography can play a part in their domination in several ways. Firstly, it can be the agent of an 'acoustic territorialisation' through the

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43 'Partecipazioni all'VIII fiera del levante', *L'Illustrazione Coloniale. Rassegna d'Espansione Italiana* (October 1937): 74.

'disintegration and reconfiguration'[44] of colonised space, i.e., following the idea of importing foreign cultural and political signs by replacing the original sound composition of this territory with recordings from the colonial power. The question of sonic dissemination arises, and with it the media network formed by phonography with radio and cinema, to which we must then add the loudspeaker and the theoretical notion of 'sonic dominance'. This concept, coined by Julian Henriques, describes the effects of sound broadcasting at very high volume on listeners, which is said to take precedence over visual perception and block rational processes.[45]

In interwar Europe, the sound of loudspeakers was already powerful, sometimes blocking thought, and European settlers used it to mark colonial territories acoustically – as Reese has noted for Australia – in order to alter the frames of native daily life and replace them with those of the invader, thus creating intermediate colonial spaces, no longer entirely native, and not yet fully assimilated. From July 1936, i.e. only a few weeks after the Italian victory, the Press and Propaganda Office (*Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda*) of the Ministry of Popular Culture (*Ministero della Cultura Popolare* - Minculpop), sought to arrange the financial and technical conditions for a sound propaganda effort launched from Addis Ababa to the more remote areas of the new Empire.[46] For this purpose, 'Empire'[47] radio sets, designed to withstand difficult conditions of use, were sought, as well as generators,

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[44] Brandon Labelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (Continuum, 2010), XXIII.

[45] Julian F. Henriques, 'Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System Session', in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, eds. Michael Bull and Les Back, (Berg, 2003), 451-452.

[46] 'Promemoria sulle attività propagandistiche che l'ufficio stampa Etiopia intenderebbe svolgere_in A.O.I., Addis Abeba, 20 luglio 1936, Fascicolo 703.4, Busta 115, Fondo 'Ministero della Cultura Popolare – Gabinetto', Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS).

[47] 'Appunto per S.E. il Ministro', 29 agosto 1936, Fascicolo 703.14, Busta 115, Fondo 'Ministero della Cultura Popolare – Gabinetto', ACS.

radiophonographs, phonographs, microphones, amplifiers, and loudspeakers.[48] This equipment was supposed to enable the regime to reach the indigenous populations by compensating for the lack of radio receivers through the organisation of massive collective listening sessions from fixed, self-powered radio sets, or trucks, each equipped with two loudspeakers and the necessary radio or phonographic equipment.[49]

In April 1937, a photo published in *La Stampa Sera* shows 'a crowd of natives around loudspeakers in Addis Ababa' listening to fascist speeches and news (ill. 5). It probably illustrates the regime's 'high mission to civilise the natives',[50] which it wished to achieve through a new framing of the Ethiopian population',[51] of a 'political-educational'[52] nature, thanks to the 'dissemination of government announcements, any news likely to increase Italy's prestige among the natives, hygienic and prophylactic advice, agricultural instructions, etc. expressed in an imaginary style capable of striking the native'.[53] Fascist sound propaganda practices not only had to be initiated from within colonial institutions, but also inserted into indigenous structures of public socialisation by organising, with the help of a technical network consisting of a microphone, a pickup, an amplifier, and a loudspeaker, collective listening in markets, 'which, according to a secular custom, are not only centers of

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48 'Copia 'Riunione tenutasi presso 11 Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, per discutere circa l'organizzazione e il funzionamento dell'Ufficio Stampa e propaganda del Governo Generale dell'A.0.I., mercoledì I7 novembre alle ore 17, Busta 115, Fondo 'Ministero della Cultura Popolare – Gabinetto', ACS.

49 'Promemoria sulle attività propagandistiche che l'ufficio stampa Etiopia intenderebbe svolgere_in A.O.I., Addis Abeba, 20 luglio 1936', Fascicolo 703.4, Busta 115, Fondo 'Ministero della Cultura Popolare – Gabinetto',ACS; 'Copia 'Riunione tenutasi presso 11 Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, per discutere circa l'organizzazione e il funzionamento dell'Ufficio Stampa e propaganda del Governo Generale dell'A.0.I., mercoledì I7 novembre alle ore 17', Busta 115, Fondo 'Ministero della Cultura Popolare – Gabinetto', ACS.

50 'Radiodiffusione circolare e diffusione sonora in A.O.I.',Addis Abeba, 7 June 1937, Busta 115, Fondo ´Ministero della Cultura Popolare – Gabinetto;, ACS.

51 'Appunto per s.e. il ministro', July 1937, Busta 115, Fondo 'Ministero della Cultura Popolare – Gabinetto', ACS.

52 'Appunto per s.e. il ministro'.

53 'Appunto per s.e. il ministro'.

exchange, but also centers for the collection and dissemination of information within a radius of several dozen kilometers'.[54]

The territories covered by the sound of loudspeakers, even without being that of an extreme experience of 'sonic dominance', are thus already colonised by the attention that 'natives' pay to these sounds and by the way in which they perhaps relay them. For the fascist regime, the loudspeaker is the key tool 'to convey expressively to the masses the voice and will of Italy' in Italian East Africa. In 1938, it was also envisaged to equip aircraft with loudspeakers to 'offer a dynamic means of impressing '…' the Ethiopian populations' and 'to reach [them] even in the most distant territories of the interior, where no military action has yet come, much less governmental action'. For the fascist authorities, such propaganda could 'precede military occupation and foster it'.[55] Loudspeakers thus prepared the way for the expansion of colonial domination by covering territories to be conquered with sound from superhuman heights.

Folla di indigeni attorno agli altoparlanti di Addis Abeba

Addis Abeba, mentre continua con ritmo rapidissimo il suo magnifico riordinamento edilizio ed è in pieno sviluppo la sua formazione industriale e commerciale, è ormai fornita di tutti i moderni accessori della vita civile, sconosciuti durante l'epoca buia della tirannia negussita. Benchè gli altoparlanti trasmittenti in tutta la città, a cura della Federazione Fascista, i discorsi e le notizie non siano più una novità, gli indigeni provenienti dalle varie regioni dell'Impero continuano ad affollarsi attorno ad essi con vera curiosità. Eccone un esempio.

Illustration 5: 'Folla di indigeni attorno agli altoparlanti di Addis Abeba,' *Stampa Sera* (19 April 19, 1937): 6.

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[54] 'Radiodiffusione circolare e diffusione sonora in A.O.I.', Addis Abeba, 7 June 1937, Busta 115, Fondo 'Ministero della Cultura Popolare – Gabinetto', ACS.

[55] 'Compiti della stampa e propaganda in Etiopia', Fascicolo '443 – Africa Orientale Italiana', Busta 72, Fondo 'Ministero della Cultura Popolare – Gabinetto', ACS.

Secondly, phonography contributes to a policy of colonial domination through the shaping and contextual displacement that recording imposes on the soundscapes of the colonised. Abbonizio notes that in Italian Libya at the end of the 1930s, radio broadcasts of recordings of local traditional and religious songs provoked a cultural upheaval and offered the Fascists additional opportunities for alienation by suggesting the backwardness of the local population: the phonographic removal of these songs, performed on specific occasions, from the usual spatio-temporal context of their performance, epitomises Italian technical superiority through its mastery of sound and the cultural framework of its manifestation.[56]

What Abbonizio relates should guide our reflection on the large corpus of colonial records produced after the establishment of the Italian Empire. As early as 1936, ten records of language courses in Amharic and six in Galla (Ethiopia), were distributed by LVDP and appeared in its January 1937 catalogue under the heading 'Lingue coloniali' (Colonial Languages).[57] Durium, which has also released records under the label *La Voce dell'Impero* (The Voice of Empire), offered eight records of Amharic lessons for those who, 'for reasons of service, study, trade or work, are already dispersed in the new lands of the Empire or are about to go there'[58] i.e. to populate and better Italianise them. In 1937, Columbia hired 'native' musicians to record ten records of 'Arabo-Tripolitanian' songs, ten of 'Arab songs' and ten of 'Kiswahili' in its 'Milan laboratory', grouped together in a 1938 catalogue under the heading 'Songs of Africa' (*Canti d'Africa*).[59] In 1939, Cetra released five records 'in Arabic', followed

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[56] Abbonizio, 'Musica e colonialismo nell'Italia fascista', 121-22.

[57] La Voce del Padrone, *Catalogo generale Dischi 'La Voce del Padrone'* (January 1, 1937), 297.

[58] Durium advertisement, cited in *Corriere Musicale. Rassegna Fonografica* (September 15, 1937).

[59] '*Queste canzoni dono state incise nel nostro laboratorio di Milano da elementi indigeni espressamente scritturati*', cited in Dischi Columbia, *Catalogo generale* (1938), 224-25.

by thirty-two records of traditional music, sacred or secular, in Arabic and Amharic in 1940.[60] Guglielmo Barblan, who published a book in 1941 on 'Musics and musical instruments of Italian East Africaa', mentions the existence of 248 recordings made by several dozen musicians from all over Ethiopia for LVDP in 1939 in Addis Ababa, during a competition organised by Eritrean merchant Salah Ahmed Checchia on the initiative of 'Cap. Dott. Giovanni Stilletti' and the Study Office of the Overseas Triennial (*Ufficio Studi della Triennale d'Oltremare*). Barblan also gives the references (but not the dates) of twenty-one records of Odeon music recorded in Amharic.[61]

This explicit interest in the cultural signs of colonised peoples seems to stem, as Ruth Ben-Ghiat writes, from 'the fascist view that taking the best that other peoples had to offer was one step on the road to conquering them'.[62] This method is exemplified in the phonographic field by two recordings of the National Fascist Party anthem Giovinezza, which also serves as the second national anthem, along with the *Marcia reale*, sung in Hebrew and Arabic, probably by Lybian vocalists.[63] In this case, colonisation is exercised through the calculated convergence of a phonographic Other with a phonographic Self – recorded versions of Giovinezza – number in the hundreds, as the song is ubiquitous in everyday Italian life. The translation of the hymn's lyrics into Hebrew and Arabic is a trap, for this rapprochement is dissymmetrical: the hybridisation of the phonographic Other with

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60 Cetra, *Dischi Cetra* (November 1939), 15; Cetra, *Dischi Cetra e Parlophon*, (January 1, 1941), 143-44.

61 Guglielmo Barblan, *Musica e strumenti musicali dell'Africa Orientale Italiana* (Edizione della Triennale d'Oltremare, 1941), 135-8; Anne Bolay, 'Un musicien au service du pouvoir. Mesganaw Aduña', *Annales d'Éthiopie* XIX (2003), 73, https://doi:10.3406/ethio.2003.1039; Chiriacò, 'Abdis Shop and the Duka Azmari House', 50-51.

62 Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities. Italy, 1922-1945* (University of California Press, 2001), 12.

63 See Abbonizio: 'Musica e colonialismo nell'Italia fascista', 170-171. 'Giovinezza : cantato in arabo', 10 inches shellac record (Parlophon, GP91859, 1936?), http://id.sbn.it/bid/DDS0309329; 'Giovinezza (coro in lingua ebraica)', 10 inches shellac record (Parlophon, GP91871, 1936 ?), http://id.sbn.it/bid/DDS0224505.

the phonographic Self aims only at Italianisation, i.e. the integration and then assimilation of the former by the latter under a regime of symbolic and physical domination.

To the best of my knowledge, these recordings are the only ones of their kind, and there are many others 'documenting' indigenous ritual and/or musical practices. However, the sound shaping involved in the phonographic process, which cannot correctly capture all sounds, and its technological state (one side of a record lasts no more than three to four minutes) already requires a meticulous selection of the sounds to be recorded. This selection work could be part of an exercise in domination and thus concerns more the sounds that will be silenced than those that will be heard. Britta Lange evokes the silences she hears in the recordings of prisoners in the German camps of the First World War where, for example, there is never any mention of disease: the operator who owns the recording equipment as an extension of his own power decides what will be kept and then heard.[64]

It is in this perspective that we may consider the contest recorded in Addis Ababa by LVDP in 1939, the result of which was decided by a commission that had to choose the performances finally broadcast, or the transportation of 'native' musicians to Milan. In both these cases, as in others, the aim was to harvest the sounds of the Empire, now Italian property, giving them the time and thus the form permitted by Western phonographic technology, without respecting their own temporality. In short, it is a question of getting hold of samples of the colonised Other, so as to be able to enjoy them at will, without respecting any of the conditions constituting their original social meaning. Phonography is thus a means of domination insofar as it produces sound objects from subjects who lose their subjectivity in the course of this socially and politically determined technical mediation. It becomes

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[64] Britta Lange, 'Archival Silences as Historical Sources. Reconsidering Sound Recordings of Prisoners of War (1915-1918) from the Berlin Lautarchiv', *Sound Effects* 3 (2018): 47-60, https://doi:10.7146/SE.V7I3.105232.

possible, for Italian households with the financial means to buy numerous records, to build up a record library of the songs and languages of the Empire, to appreciate the diversity and number of its productions, and to imagine themselves as Italians, perhaps Fascists, as the rightful owners.

However, they were unable to remain owners for long. The Italian Empire and Italian East Africa ceased to exist in 1941 when Italian troops were expelled by the Allies. The Cetra catalogue of 1942, however, continues to offer colonial records recorded under the Empire. How can this persistence be interpreted? Apart from a commercial interest, it could be explained by a legitimate musical and aesthetic interest in these recordings, which document practices that would fascinate their listeners. It could also be explained by an immediate nostalgia for the lost Empire, which the sound of colonial music would help to heal. Finally, it could be explained by the need of the Italian people, whose country met difficulties halfway through the Second World War, to boost morale by remembering its imperial greatness. Whatever the explanation, the prevailing uncertainty surrounding this question serves to illustrate the extent to which phonography, as a means of expansion and domination, is also a mediator of profoundly versatile practices and histories depending on the frame in which it exists.

Conclusion: The Colonial Power of Phonography and Its Other

To conclude, I would like to consider the political versatility of phonography in a colonial context through two specific cases. The first regards the participation of the Azmari Mesganaw Aduña in the 1939 Addis Ababa competition, a recording which the historian Anne Bolay was able to hear and about which she asks an important question:[65] famous in the

[65] An *azmari* is an Ethiopian musician and poet.

Gondar region and close to several Ethiopian chiefs, described by Bolay as a 'chronicler of the present time' and of the greatness of the dignitary for whom he sings, how should we interpret the fact that, again according to Bolay, the whole of Mesganaw Aduña's song emphasises the qualities of the contest committee, the leaders of the Italian occupation, and Benito Mussolini?[66] Was the *azmari* forced to sing these verses, or did he choose them freely? Bolay does not give a definitive answer, but she does suggest that the singer, having risen to high office after the Italian occupation, probably acted as he would have done when faced with an Ethiopian dignitary whose praises he would have sung, before doing the same for one of his enemies. In short, the colonial context would not have altered Mesganaw Aduña's being-in-the-world as an *azmari*. Despite his formatting through phonography and the judgment of the Italian commission, the cultural matrix generating his art would have remained active at the heart of the recording, beneath the norms of a colonial technical, political, and cultural shaping.

But it is likely that this possibly truthful aspect of azmari practice cannot be revealed in any listening context. From this point of view, an indigenous audience familiar with this practice would recognise in this recording the perpetuation of a tradition that did not involve the performer's political allegiances, while an audience composed of Italians in favour of colonisation would hear in it, through the phonographic Other represented by Mesganaw Aduña, a sign of the submission of an entire people and its adherence to Italy's 'civilising mission'. On the one hand, an indigenous listening frame would render the colonist's praise of an ancient and accepted social function; on the other, a colonial listening frame would enact the submission and domination of the culture and people represented by the recording.

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[66] Bolay, 'Un musicien au service du pouvoir', 76-80.

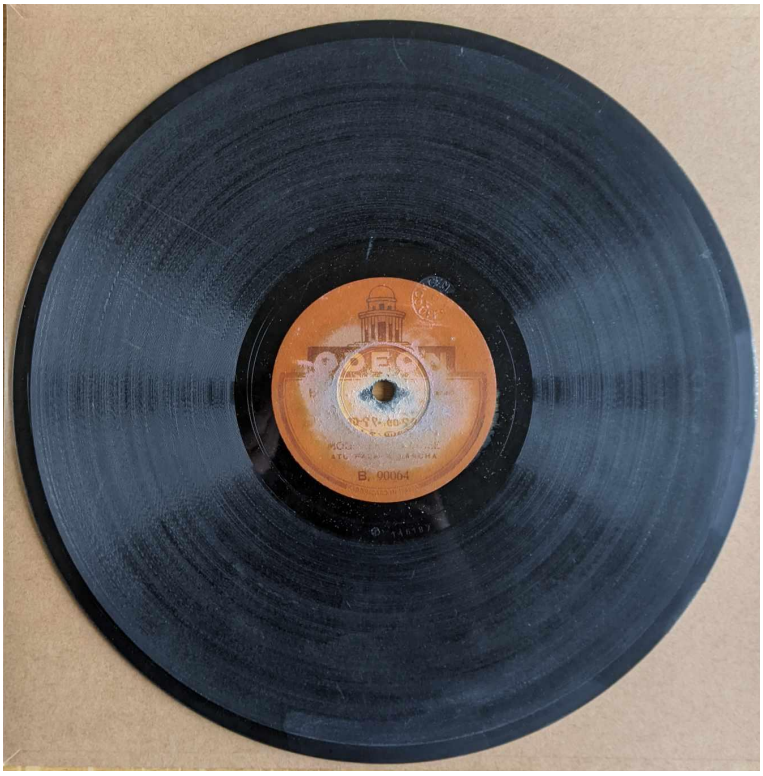

Illustration 6: Side 1 of an Italian Odeon record of Ethiopian or Eritrean music, date undetermined. Thomas Henry Collection (France; permission granted).

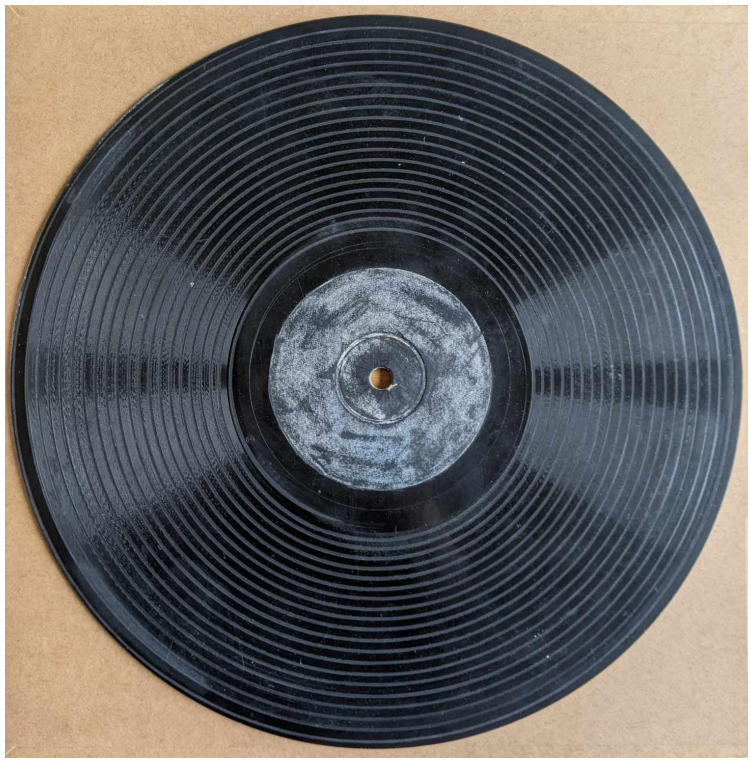

Illustration 7: Side 2 probably censored from an Italian Odeon record of Ethiopian or Eritrean music, date undetermined. Thomas Henry Collection (France; permission granted).

However, the political practices of the record do not always take such considerations into account, as shown by the second case I wish to discuss here: an allegory of the duplicity of colonial recording provided by an Italian Odeon record, probably dating from the mid-1930s. On the first side, the label is almost obliterated, but we can make out signs that seem to correspond to the Guèze alpha-syllabary used in Ethiopia and Eritrea (ill. 6). There is also a reference, B. 90064, similar to those mentioned by Barblan. Its unlabelled side 2 has been rendered unplayable by a concentrically driven tool, as evidenced by the regular, spiral-like destruction of its surface (ill. 7). This could be the result of censorship carried out on all the records bearing this recording by an institution possessing the appropriate equipment, and therefore of censorship by the Fascist regime that forbade and destroyed records since at least the late 1920s. The record has one side considered useful to the interests – or at least conforming to the standards – of the regime, while the other, which we imagine to be coherent with the first, must be rendered unreadable and be silenced, perhaps for political reasons. This suggests that the political, cultural, and symbolic control that phonography offered the Fascist regime over the imagination of an Other it wished to dominate was rendered imperfect by the phonographic operations themselves, which could never totally condition either the sound production process or its listening. Like any tool, phonography is versatile: while it may be the result of a desire for social engineering, for collection, appropriation, or cultural rape, it always conceals the possibility that an ear will detect a meaning that radically contradicts this desire. This means that phonography is perceived by the Fascist regime as the medium of a potentially absolute, natural, truthful meaning, whose

signification and effects do not depend on a listening framework, thus manifesting a totalitarian conception of its social functioning.

This case and the first thus suggest two modes of existence for phonographic truth and performative fidelity. The first would oppose two 'truths' revealed by the listening environment, while the second would deny the latter, thus unifying auditory spaces as those of a single policy, and manifesting a totalitarian conception of sound and sound media. These two hypothetical cases may lead us to reflect on the relationships that listeners construct today with these records, whose political agentivity has not disappeared but may be reformulated according to the circumstances of the moment. Nowadays, in the Italian context, the phonographic corpus of propaganda, corresponding to a phase of expansion, and of colonial music, corresponding to a phase of domination are, as the works of Chiriacò and Tamburini show, two sites of memory: that of the racism or fascism and of Italy's colonial past; that of Ethiopian, Eritrean, Somali, or Libyan music under colonial rule. Phonography, a medium characterised by its versatility, ambivalence, and ambiguity, thus ultimately places the onus on the listener: it is up to them to determine how much he or she is willing to be affected by it, bearing in mind the influence of the listening frame, the performative capacity of recordings, and their political capacity to represent and summon imaginations. This calls for a continued and informed critique of the recorded corpus so that the listener fashions – through his or her ear, memory, and humanity – representations of an Other to whom he or she feels close rather than distant, identifying the Self into the Other.

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