

The Arrival of Edison's Tinfoil Phonograph in San Francisco and the Grand Musical Festival of May, 1878

John A. Emerson

THE DEVELOPMENT OF Thomas Alva Edison's tinfoil phonograph took place during the summer, fall, and early winter months of 1877 at Edison's laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey. Past accounts of how its technology germinated were confused and incomplete. Happily, Raymond Wile, a librarian at Queens College, Flushing, New York—after painstakingly re-examining the knotty problem of chronology—published a definitive historical account in the *Journal of the Association for Recorded Sound Archives* (vol. 14:2, 1982, 5–28).

In 1985, 33 cartons of documents and artifacts, which had been stolen in the spring of 1976 from the Edison National Historical Site, West Orange, New Jersey (the primary repository of Edison's memorabilia) were found in Redwood City, California. The detective work leading to the identification of the culprit and recovery of the materials by the Federal Bureau of Investigation are chronicled by H. Bart Cox in *Manuscripts* (vol. 37:4, Fall, 1985, 261–274).

However, it is not our present purpose to comment on how the tinfoil phonograph first saw the light of day in 1877. Instead, our story details later events in the Promised Land—San Francisco. On February 19, 1878, about three months before an exhibition model reached the West Coast, Edison was granted a patent for his invention of the tinfoil phonograph. Later that year, 1878, the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company, 66 Reade Street, New York, issued an eight-page instruction manual prescribing the proper use and care of the tinfoil phonograph. An illustration from the manual gives us an image of the device (Figure 1).

The apparatus was attached to a small iron base, and two metal standards supported it, one on each side. A brass cylinder grooved with 24 threads per inch was mounted horizontally on a cast-steel shaft and two main bearings. In order to insure uniform

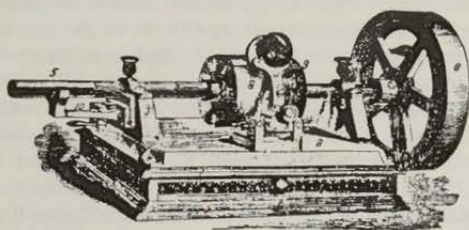


FIGURE 1. From *Instrudtions for the Management and Operation of Edison's Speaking Phonograph*, Philadelphia, 1878.

rotary motion a heavy flywheel was attached to one end of the shaft. A rectangular tinfoil sheet was carefully wrapped around the cylinder. Suspended above was the mouthpiece; it consisted of a diaphragm made of mica to which was attached a stylus. As the cylinder, shaft, and flywheel were rotated by hand by means of a crank, the vibrating needle-point embossed vibrations on the surface of the tinfoil. Sound was reproduced by rewinding the cylinder back to the start position, then retracing the needle carefully over the grooves. The operator was cautioned to turn the crank steadily at 60 revolutions per minute—especially when recording music.

One further technical point: the tinfoil phonograph was an acoustical device with no electrical amplification whatsoever. Consequently, the question of how much volume a well adjusted exhibition model (made before May, 1878) could produce is debatable. Publicity claims were one thing, accounts by those who attended demonstrations were quite another.

From one historical perspective, what happened when the tinfoil phonograph reached San Francisco can be dismissed as little else than marketing hum-

bug concocted by the Edison Phonograph Company in New York. Even so, our purpose is to place this seemingly parochial event within a larger social context: making it serve as a commentary on the times.

THE PHONY PROFESSOR FABER [II] AND HIS INHERITED OR PURLOINED "SPEAKING AUTOMATON"

One of the principal centers of entertainment in San Francisco during the 1870's was the California Theatre, which opened its doors on January 18, 1869. Dubbed the "Deutsches," because many of its shows were directed specifically toward the large colony of German-speaking citizens of the city, it was located on the north side of Bush street between Kearny and Dupont. The financial wizard William C. Ralston, founder of the Bank of California and the Palace Hotel, paid 800 bars of finest grade gold bullion for its construction. The firm of Samuel Charles Bugbee (1812-1877) and Son drew up the plans. Later we will meet the junior member of the firm, then an amateur actor, Sumner W. Bugbee (*d* 1899), who played a vital role in bringing Edison's phonograph to town.

On Monday, November 17, 1873, a society play entitled *Field and Fireside* was staged at the California. One of its smartest effects was a skirmish between Union and Confederate troops during the Civil War. Between the first and second acts, a certain professor Faber (no first name) "from Vienna" demonstrated for the first time in San Francisco a device known as the *Talking Machine*. Faber, calling himself a native of Freiburg, claimed to have been an astronomer whom failing sight had diverted into a study of anatomy and mechanics.

The "Professor Faber" enticing the public at San Francisco in 1873 had then inherited or purloined his Talking Machine from a like named exhibitor at London who during the summer of 1846 had labelled the contraption Euphonia, the Talking Turkish Torso (Figure 2). The *London Times* of August 12, 1846, 3:6, carried an article identifying the "Professor Faber" exhibiting his "Euphonia" at Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, as a 60-year-old German educated at Vienna Royal Polytechnic Institution (see Richard D. Altick's *The Shows of London*, 1978). William Makepeace Thackeray, the Victorian novelist who observed Euphonia in action, wrote a fanciful piece in *Punch, or The London Charivari* (vol. 11, 1846, 83):



FIGURE 2. The Euphonia, or Speaking Machine, exhibited in London the summer of 1846. From *The Illustrated London News* (August 6, 1846, 96). The levers are located at one end of the small table, with the treadle below. The bellows are located behind the corseted waxen lady, not beneath the table. The machine is positioned horizontally—not vertically, as demonstrated in San Francisco.

. . . A clear saving of ten thousand a year might be effected by setting up a machine *en permanence* in the Speaker's chair of the House of Commons. Place the mace before it. Have a large snuff-box on the side, with rappee and Irish for the convenience of Members, and a simple apparatus for crying out "Order, Order," at intervals of ten minutes, and you have a speaker at a most trifling cost. . . . By far the best part of Euphonia is its *hiss*; this is perfect. And perhaps the fact suggests to the benevolent mind that hissing is the very easiest occupation of life.

With him, the Faber who visited San Francisco in 1873 brought an imposing collection of credentials attesting to the scientific worth of his invention—probably mostly bogus. However, it is true that on June 14, 1872, he had exhibited his Speech-Machine at the Stadt-Theater in New York City. The San Francisco newspaper advertisements proclaimed that

This truly Marvelous piece of mechanism is capable of giving sound and utterances exactly resembling the human voice, SPEAKING IN ANY LANGUAGE, and imitating exactly the motion of the tongue, lips, and jaws.

The *Alta California* (November 14, 1873) described a private demonstration held for the city's press:

Professor Faber yesterday afternoon gave an exhibition of the vocal powers of his wonderful talking machine to members of the Press and invited guests in the parlors of the Occidental Hotel. . . . The machine (so-called) was a curious and complicated piece of mechanism. All, or nearly all, of its parts are fully exposed to the view of the observer, and are more puzzling than imposing in appearance. The main parts rest upright on a small gilded table at one end of which the operator sits before a series of levers, which are worked as the keys of a piano. Beneath is a treadle of a bellows, which latter is attached above it to perform the mechanical lungs of the machine. Wood and India rubber are the materials of which the vocal apparatus is constructed, in striking similarity to the organs of a human being. . . . Some words are enunciated with amazing distinctness; phrases in English, French, German, and Hebrew were framed and pronounced so that they could be clearly understood. . . . Madame Faber operates the machine.

Field and Fireside and Professor Faber's entr'acte played six evenings. Further demonstrations of the "marvelous mechanism," which included a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Cox, continued at Woodward's Gardens from Thanksgiving Day, November 27, through December 7.

THE FIRST (?) PHONOGRAPH IN SAN FRANCISCO

Five and a half years after Faber left San Francisco to join Barnum, San Francisco newspapers began May 2, 1878, proclaiming "The Phonograph Is Here." Alas, was it any more the real thing than Faber's deception? Had Kennedy, manager of the Grand Opera House on Mission Street that was shortly to declare bankruptcy, perpetrated as much of a hoax on his public as had Faber?

Times were hard. The California stock market had crashed four times since 1870, punctuated by the "Black Fridays" of May 15, 1872, and August 27, 1875; San Francisco's Fidelity Bank had gone bankrupt. Denis Kearny (1847-1907), the agitator from Cork, Ireland, who formed the Workingmen's Party in 1877, had overpowered the Republicans, the Democrats, and the Independents. His tirades against the Chinese were sweet music to many ears. Among less ominous happenings in 1878: on April 1, Berkeley was incorporated. On April 8, Edward Everett Rice (1848-1924) and his American Bouffe Extravaganza Combination opened at the Grand Opera House with *Evangeline*. (The burlesque

ranked with *The Black Crook* and *Humpty Dumpty* as the most popular musical produced in America between 1865 and 1879, the beginning of the *HMS Pinafore* rage).

The capability of the Bell telephone for long distance use was tested for the first time between San Francisco and Sacramento on Sunday, April 28. George Solon Ladd (1841-1899), president of the California Electrical Works, talked with John F. Allen, manager of Western Union, in Sacramento. Every musical note from a tiny pocket music box held by Ladd was heard distinctly at the other end, some ninety miles removed!

On the evening of May 2 new electrical lights were exhibited for the first time at Baldwin's Theatre. On May 18, Mount Hamilton was selected as the site for the Lick telescope. May 28 saw the opening of Grand May Music Festival of 1878 at Mechanics' Pavilion. And, on June 19, at Platt's Hall, 152 delegates were selected to frame a new Constitution for the State of California. (The Constitution was ratified on May 7, 1879.)

Evangeline played at the Grand Opera House for three weeks. On Saturday, April 27, it was succeeded by another Rice production, *Conrad the Corsair*. An educated donkey, songs, dialogs, choruses, a female gigantic ballet, "and other mirth-provoking specialties too numerous to mention" were included. Between the acts, the comic, Sol Smith Russell (1848-1902), and the ventriloquist, Curtis, performed recitations.

Conrad was advertised each day in the newspapers through May 1. On May 2 the ad was embellished with a new message:

Special and Extraordinary Announcement! This Thursday Evening and Every Evening during the Week and the Saturday Matinee, Will be exhibited, for the first time in San Francisco, the greatest of modern inventions, THE PHONOGRAPH, Secured by the Management with great difficulty and expense.

That same day, May 2, the *Evening Post* ran a scathing exposé:

The Grand Opera House advertises that it will exhibit this evening, "for the first time in San Francisco, the greatest of modern inventions, the phonograph, secured by the management with great difficulty and expense." Inquiry at the offices of the Gold and Stock Telegraph Company [George S. Ladd was president] and other centers of information shows that no phonograph has yet been brought to this city. The above announcement is simply an attempt to defraud the public of which "a first

class theater" ought to be ashamed. By aid of ventriloquism it is hoped to persuade a credulous public, that an empty box, with a handle attached, is a sample of Edison's wonderful machine.

That evening, between the acts of *Corsair*, Sol Smith Russell read a statement by the management (*Evening Call*, May 3):

... Although the apparatus is in the house, it was not in working order, but, that it would be all right tomorrow night, even "if they had to break an egg into it." Those who were disappointed were invited to receive their money back at the box office.

Cancellation of the phonograph exhibition played right into the hands of the *Evening Post* (May 3):

... The *Post* promptly and properly exposed the whole business yesterday evening, and the result was that the public, disgusted at such treatment at the hands of what is claimed to be a first-class theater, stayed away more than ever. It is needless to add that no phonograph was exhibited, and a lame managerial apology was the only satisfaction which the few people who had "bitten" at the fraud, and invested their dollars to help prop up the fortunes of the house, received for the indignity that had been put upon them. Comment on the entire transaction seems unnecessary.

During intermission on Friday, May 4, 1878, a phonograph-like device was indeed exhibited. Next day the *Chronicle* gave the fullest account of the affair:

There was a good audience at the Grand Opera House last evening . . . probably the expectation of an exhibition of something called the "phonograph" added a few to the number. At the end of the first act of *The Corsair*, Sol Smith Russell appeared in full dress and gave some of his specialties, throwing in two or three extra recitations to bring the audience into an exuberant good humor. He retired, and there were loud calls in the gallery, either for his return or for something not very clearly defined.

The curtain rose again, and disclosed Mr. Russell standing meekly by the right hand proscenium box, a music stand before him, on which appeared to be a manuscript after the manner of a professed lecturer. From this manuscript Mr. Russell read a long and exceedingly prosaic discourse on the phonograph, to which the audience listened with impatience, and an occasional interruption from the gallery.

The lecture finished, the front scene was withdrawn, revealing a cylinder in the middle of the stage, that might have been either a patent churn or a clothes-wringer. On

the table beside it were a few slips of paper. Mr. Russell stated that some voices talked into the phonograph during the day would be reproduced by the instrument. He thrust a piece of paper into the cylinder, and pretended to adjust it.

Then came three words from Denman Thompson. They were reported mechanically, in a voice that faintly resembled Mr. Thompson's. Next, was a reproduction of the voice of Barton Hill. "Ladies and gentlemen, good evening," said the instrument without the slightest resemblance to Mr. Hill's voice, except the well-known prolongation of the last syllable. It was observed that the instrument had a slight huskiness in the throat, and trembled as if in some fear of a shower of cabbages from the gallery. Mr. Russell, also, began to get a little shaky. A third effort was made—this time the voice of Lawrence Barrett repeating from *Richelieu* the words "In the bright lexicon of youth there's no such word as fail."

No sooner were these uttered, than cries of "Curtis! Curtis!" [the ventriloquist] ran along the tiers, to which the entire house responded with shouts of derisive laughter. The whole shabby trick was at once apparent, and with the words "Good night! Good night!" in a terrified tone from the instrument, the exhibition was brought to a hasty close. . . .

General surprise was expressed that Mr. Russell should have lent himself to the aid of such a transparent humbug. It had not a shadow of cleverness, either in the conception or in the execution.

On the surface this account in the *Chronicle* seems clear enough. Still, anomalies lurk behind the scene which are pervasive enough to raise the question: fraud or phonograph?

The *Evening Post* correctly stated that the Grand Opera House was in serious financial difficulty, for on the Monday following the exhibition, May 6, it declared bankruptcy and the Bank of Nevada took over its assets. However, if Kennedy, the manager, was unscrupulous and had perpetrated a hoax in order to stimulate box-office receipts, why would he offer disgruntled patrons their money back?

The *Post* predicted beforehand that a box with an attached handle would be exhibited. Indeed, Sol Smith Russell was alone on center stage in the Grand Opera House with such a device. However, it is difficult to imagine how the alleged impersonator, Curtis, who was the voice of the box, could have acted as ventriloquist. The Grand Opera House was a leviathan, and according to Langley's *City Directory* for 1878, it was the largest stage in the United States, measuring 85 feet deep, 106 feet wide, and nearly 80 feet high (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3. Stage of the Grand Opera House (from *The Footlight*, July 27, 1878).

During the exhibition, the apparatus issued a total of 24 words. The three persons whose voices were allegedly recorded beforehand were prominent San Franciscan theatrical personalities who had no association with the Grand Opera House. Denman Thompson (1833–1911), a comedian, had just completed an eight-week engagement at Emerson's Opera House portraying his character Joshua Whitcomb. Barton Hill was acting manager of the California Theatre. And Lawrence Barrett (1838–1891), the reigning thespian lion in town, was presenting a dramatic impersonation of the Cardinal in Edward George Bulwar's *Richelieu* at the California Theatre.

If the exhibition was a hoax, if unauthorized rival professional talent was impersonated by Curtis, it seems this would have provoked further scandal in the newspapers which the *Post* would have pounced upon to justify its claims of fraud. Thompson, Hill, and Barrett would have been the butt of ridicule. But no denials surfaced later.

Still, the question remains: If there actually were a phonograph (its existence was denied by all the newspapers) where did it come from? The answer may lie with a story which the *Chronicle* broke on Thursday, May 23. One was located at the California Electrical Works, 134 Sutter Street. A private owner had given it to George S. Ladd, president, for repair:

... The reporter discovered the famous instrument lying unused on the floor of the office. Stephen D. Field, the electrician of the company, kindly consented to give a free exhibition of the instrument's powers, stipulating, however, that as the entertainment was cheap the audience must not be critical. ... He then picked up the

phonograph, adjusted a fresh layer of tin-foil, and uttered in a loud tone of voice through the mouthpiece a description of "Mary's little lamb." ... Mr. Field re-adjusted the needle and began turning the crank ... but only a half-smothered whispering was given forth. ... The experiment was repeated with more gratifying results ... this was probably owing to the improvisation by Mr. Field of a paper funnel, held with the larger end in close proximity to the listener's ear. ... Mr. Ladd, the president of the company, who was in New York in the month of March [he was securing telephones for the May Festival], and witnessed the test of one of the most perfect instruments then in existence ... thinks the instrument possessed sufficient power to be distinctly heard in a room not exceeding in dimensions forty square feet.

The documented existence of a privately owned phonograph in San Francisco prior to the opening of the Grand Music Festival strongly suggests that it might have been the contrivance exhibited two weeks earlier at the Grand Opera House. This machine that was found on the floor of the California Electrical Works was surely not manufactured by the Edison Company (their phonographs were circulated as exhibition models and were not for sale to the public), but a clone possibly made by a small firm in New Jersey. If this opinion is correct, the management of the Opera House severely overestimated its capabilities when used in such an immense theater and under such adverse newspaper publicity.

Saturday, May 18, 1878, the *Evening Post* was at it again—another exposé! Dateline: Marysville, California, a village located some 160 miles northeast of San Francisco, the gateway to the Mother Lode country. The following account is extracted from a lengthy article:

Discouraged when his receipts fell to an abysmal low, Mr. Patchley, manager of the theater in Marysville, struck upon the idea of exhibiting the best advertised thing in America, the phonograph. The stage carpenter built a scientific-looking replica, and Mr. Quiggs, the company mimic, agreed to become the insides of the apparatus. That evening there was a tremendous audience, but when the phonograph scene was called Quiggs was nowhere in sight. Mr. Patchley was almost crazy when the missing comedian was captured in a beer saloon and brought behind stage. There was no time to annihilate the offender. When the curtain was rung up, Quiggs inserted himself through the demon hole of the stage floor, and at the precise moment, ran his head into the phonograph box.

As the demonstration proceeded, answers from the apparatus became more and more extravagant; it was obvious that the beast of a Quiggs was drunk. Finally, when queried, an inebriated Rutherford B. Hayes, our beloved President, began to declare himself loudly. Whereupon, Judge Jenkensen arose from his private box and declared in a thunderous voice, "I pronounce this entire affair an outrageous swindle." With that, the crowd stormed from the theater, breaking everything in sight and howling epithets at Patchley. We must report that since the dreadful night the manager has been on the trail of a bottlenecked phonograph named Quiggs.

So reported the *Post*. But, the facts are less spectacular. The town had a single place of entertainment, the Marysville Theater, which was located on Maiden Lane adjacent to Swain and Hudson's Box Manufacturing Company. During the months of April and May, 1878, five attractions took place. The Ladies Fair lasted two days. A troupe from Piper's Theater in Virginia City stayed two days. And, three acts were booked in from San Francisco; they also stayed two days each. In other words, the Marysville Theater was dark 40 out of 60 days. The managers of the Marysville Theater were Crosbie and Maeder; no Patchley in sight.

Marysville's newspapers, the *Daily Appeal* and the *Weekly Appeal*, normally consisted of six or seven pages per issue and were profusely ornamented with advertisements. But not a single syllable about a phonograph! In other words, this scene set in the foothills of the grand Sierra and the cavorting of the locals was an outlandish spoof concocted by a big city newspaper, the *Post*. It was the *Post*, not the managers of the Marysville Theater, that was benefiting financially by exploiting "the best advertised thing in America."

During research for this paper, one type of article dealing with the primitive phonograph surpassed in number all others: reprints of stories published in Eastern newspapers, the *New York Post*, *Boston Journal*, *Washington Post and Union*, *Albany New York Evening Journal*, and *Chicago Tribune*, among others. Many of these articles were undoubtedly floated by Edison's own publicity people.

Most of the articles were originally published several weeks prior to their appearance in the Bay Area papers. The earliest was Edward H. Johnson's letter to *Scientific American* (November 14, 1877), which, for all practical purposes, was the first public description of Edison's method for recording the

human voice. The article did not reach the *Alta California* until December 26.

The subject of these reprint articles ranged from serious discussions of the apparatus and the promise which it held for the future, to twaddle about Edison's personal idiosyncrasies: how he combed his hair, or what luncheon desserts he preferred.

San Francisco newspapers, however, did have their imitations of William Makepeace Thackeray—men of literary inclination who drew inspiration from mechanical contrivances. Like Thackeray's repartee in *Punch* to Professor Faber's demonstration of the Talking Turkish Torso at London's Egyptian Hall in 1846, our journalists, too, became inventors. Their devices using the principle of Edison's phonograph responded to social and political conditions in the city. Two of these published tom-fooleries, classic representations of the Talking Pen, bear repetition.

First, political invective (from the *Evening Post*, June 12, 1878):

... The reader will no doubt be incredulous when we state . . . that we were favored last evening with a private exhibition of an invention, which the beholder is instinctively led to the conclusion, that the progress of human ingenuity has nearly grasped the infinite. The wonderful machine does no less than tell the future. When we state that we have seen this wonderful machine, and when we produce the proofs of our assertion, all doubt and skepticisms must yield to wondrous awe.

The instrument, which the inventor calls the *Prose-mainograph*, is a name bunglingly coined from the Greek, and is supposed to signify a written revelation. As yet it is incomplete, not patented, and cannot penetrate the future beyond a period of thirty hours.

When invited by the inventor to put it to a special test . . . a happy idea occurred to us. The Concrete Non-partisan statesmen were to hold a meeting this evening in Platt's Hall. "Give me a full and accurate report of the meeting," we said, "and the *Post* will make your name and your invention famous throughout the length and breadth of the civilized globe."

The inventor retired to a corner of the room, and for a few moments was wrapt in deep meditation, when, arising with a pallid face and compressed lips, as if conscious of the magnitude of the task, he said, "I accept the test."

The inventor then seated himself behind a machine, and after a series of manipulations which were concealed from our observation, it was set in motion. Promptly and without apparent difficulty, a roll of paper commenced to unwind from a steel cylinder on which was neatly printed the following report of the Concrete meeting.



Thereafter, the *Evening Post* published a scathing satire of five local politicians, who attempted to outdo each other as they described their humility. The lampoon, which used Edison's phonograph as a metaphor, occupied nearly three front page columns.

Second, intoxication—San Francisco's most serious social evil (from the *Daily Examiner*, May 14, 1878):

... Imbibing in a mint julep, Edison invented a machine that is likely to revolutionize the entire saloon business. This machine, the toddygraph, is so constructed, that when a person who has been partaking of some of the spiritous beverages, breathes into it, the action of his breath upon a peculiarly prepared substance (made to revolve slowly by means of a small crank) makes an impression, that by again applying the lips and turning the crank the other way, the effects of the drink can be reproduced as many times as desired. Of course, the saloons will fight against it bitterly, as it must inevitably destroy the business of 99 out of 100 of them.

A person can mix his drinks, just to suit himself, and then stock his toddygraph with a supply of different beverages sufficient to last him a lifetime. And when he has drunk himself to death with it, his children can bring the instrument out occasionally, and revive tender recollections of their parent by turning the crank and getting a whiff of the old man's breath.

THE GRAND MAY MUSICAL FESTIVAL OF 1878

The commanding musical and social entertainment of the year 1878 in San Francisco was the Grand May Musical Festival "tendered by the Vocal and Instrumental Talent of California." Principal festivities took place on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, May 28 through 30. Additional concerts were extended daily through Monday, June 3.

Most of the performances took place at Mechanics' Pavilion, located on Eighth Street, between Market and Mission. This was the fifth Pavilion building; it opened with the Ninth Industrial Exhibition on August 18, 1874, at a cost of \$106,330.60. The central nave was 450 feet long and 100 feet wide. Galleries, each 50 feet wide, extended the length of the building on both sides. Assuming the fifth Pavilion averaged about 50 feet in height, it occupied about 4,500,000 cubic feet, a sizable volume to fill with sound (for a photograph of the interior of the fifth pavilion, see *100 years of Mechanics' Institute of San Francisco, 1855-1955*, San Francisco, 1955).

AMUSEMENTS

GRAND MUSICAL FESTIVAL,

.....AT THE.....

MECHANICS' PAVILION,

SAN FRANCISCO,

May 28th, 29th, and 30th, at 2:30 P. M.

The CHORAL SOCIETIES of San Francisco and Oakland
will unite with those from Oregon and
the interior, making a

Grand Chorus of 2,000 Trained Voices!

EASTERN SOLOISTS.

ANNA DRASDIL, New York. M. W. WHITNEY, Boston. HELEN AMES
BILLINGS, St. Louis. MISS ABBIE CLARKE, Boston.
W. H. FESSENDEN, Boston.

EDISON'S PHONOGRAPH WILL BE EXHIBITED

SAMUEL HUBBARD, Agent.

The ANTLIL CHORUS will be given each day with Full Chorus, Banquet of Artists, Grand Orchestra, Organ, and Full Military Band, accompanied by Artillery, Artills and chiming of City Bells. The Cannon will be discharged by Electricity from the Conductors' Stand, and the Artills will be beaten by

BLACKSMITHS IN COSTUME!

BOUQUET OF ARTISTS!

HORN QUARTET!

CONDUCTORS:

CARL ZERRAHN - - - - - Boston.
JOHN P. MORGAN and R. HEROLD - - - - San Francisco

DAILY EXCURSIONS FROM SACRAMENTO, STOCKTON AND SAN JOSE.

Programme in Amusement Column.

POPULAR PRICES:

Admission, \$1 00, without seat. Secured Seats, \$1 50
and \$2 00, according to location.

SUMNER W. BUGBEE, Manager.

FIGURE 4. Advertisement from the *Morning Call*, May 26, 1878.

Preparations for the May Festival of 1878 commenced in late February when Sumner W. Bugbee (he and his father designed the California Theatre) was selected as chairman of the Executive Committee. Bugbee was no Johnny-come-lately, for he had managed the mammoth Camilla Urso (1842-1902) Music Festival in San Francisco, February 22-26, 1870.

Carl Zerrahn (1826-1909), conductor of the Handel and Haydn Society and the Harvard Musical



Association orchestra, was summoned from Boston as the general musical director. Eastern soloists engaged for the Festival were Anna Drasdil, prima donna from New York; Myron W. Whitney (1836-1910), basso from Boston; Helen Ames Billings, soprano from St. Louis; Abbie Clarke, contralto from Boston; and William H. Fessenden, tenor from Boston.

The orchestra consisted of 116 San Francisco instrumentalists. Choral societies from San Francisco, Oakland, Sacramento, San Jose, San Diego, Santa Barbara, Portland, Nevada City, Marysville, and many other towns were united to form a chorus of 1690 trained voices. In addition, professional vocalists from the region joined the chorus as soloists. Conductors of the ensemble were John P. Morgan of Oakland and Rudolph Herold of San Francisco (Figure 4).

But the conductors, chorus, soloists, and orchestra could not match in popularity The Great Beater of the Big Drum, James Smith. This genius wielded a beater ten feet long against the spotted sides of the monster drum that stood well over 12 feet tall and cost \$800.00. Not even the 27 red-shirted, leather-aproned blacksmiths, who sledged away at their anvils during Verdi's masterpiece, could excite the admiration of this great artist. Only the tumultuous shouts of applause were sufficient to drown out the thundering instrument.

Advertisements heralding the May Music Festival started appearing in the newspapers (including the Marysville *Daily Appeal*) in mid-April. Then, in its Sunday edition of May 19, the *Chronicle* announced:

In addition to the many and varied attractions of the May Music Festival, there will be exhibited for the first time in this city, the phonograph. Mr. Bugbee completed the necessary arrangements with Samuel Hubbard, agent for the Bell Telephone Company, for the exhibition of the phonograph which arrives here some time during this coming weekend.

On April 24, 1878, the Edison Speaking Phonograph Co. was organized under the laws of Connecticut to exploit the commercial potential of the phonograph. Among the five trustees was Gardiner Greene Hubbard (1822-1897), father-in-law of Alexander Graham Bell, and the chief organizer and backer of the Bell Telephone Co. Was the agent for the Bell Telephone Company in San Francisco,

Samuel Hubbard, with offices at 320 Sansome Street, room 9, a relative of Gardiner G. Hubbard of Boston? (Gardiner and his wife, Gertrude Mercer McCurdy Hubbard, had six children: Robert, Gertrude, Mabel, Roberta, Grace, and Marian. Mabel, who had been left deaf by scarlet fever as a child, married Alexander Graham Bell in 1877.)

The problem of transporting a phonograph machine from the East Coast was solved with dispatch. Paul Oeker, a New York journalist, was about to leave for San Francisco to write up the Chinese slavery question and Denis Kearny's Workingman's Party. Oeker, a personal friend of Edison, thus served as the trusted courier.

Oeker arrived on the overland stage from Sacramento on Sunday, May 26. Next day he tested the phonograph in Mechanics' Pavilion before a number of invited guests and the press. The *Chronicle* ran a lengthy page-one account of the demonstration in its Tuesday edition:

At either end of a plain cast-iron base, about 18 inches long and six inches wide, are cast-iron standards, six inches high. An inscription is lettered across the base *Experimental Apparatus for Illustrating the Principles of Edison's Speaking Phonograph. Patented February 19, 1878.* . . . Mr. Oeker turned the crank end of the screw, as the cylinder revolved slowly past the needle point, he called into the mouthpiece, "Good morning, Mr. Phonograph." He then whirled the cylinder back to its original position, readjusted the needle, and again commenced to turn the cylinder. "Good morning," yelled the phonograph at itself.

Next, Mrs. Anna E. Stetson, the admired contralto of Reverend Dr. Andrew L. Stone's First Congregational Church, warbled the air of a song into the mouthpiece. Mr. Phonograph tilted the words back, but the melody was missing. Mrs. Stetson, not at all discouraged, again sang into the unappreciative mechanism, and the phonograph returned the charge splendidly, "If a body meet a body comin' thru the rye." This was an immense success.

An effort to record the notes of an aria played on the French horn of Mr. Ernest Schlott partially failed. . . . Finally, Mr. Bugbee entered into conversation with the stranger, and imparted some information about California politics. Mr. Phonograph agreed with marked emphasis with the prevailing sentiments and howled out in correct sand lot recitativos, "The Chinese must go. Denis Kearney is all right."

The instrument was at the verge of the stage on the Mission Street side of the hall, and its utterances could be distinctly heard at the second tier of boxes near the Market Street side (the distance was 450 feet).

OPENING DAY OF THE FESTIVAL

The doors of the Festival opened on the afternoon of Tuesday, May 28. The following description blends excerpts from articles in the *Evening Post*, the *Chronicle*, and the *Morning Call*.

A high wind swept over the Cliff House and sailed shrieking down Mission and Market Streets. It was erratic enough to raise sand in clouds from every vacant lot, and from the banks of sand that lined the street, and to send it along in whirling masses, into the eyes and down the necks of every unfortunate pedestrian facing westward.

The pavements were dense with ladies with flower-topped heads bent resolutely forward and long skirts flying defiantly backwards. The wind twitched rolls of music and chorus books from under clinging arms, and transformed unboxed violins into wild Aeolian harps.

At 2 o'clock, the dense rush for admission was at its height and the great portico of the Pavilion was packed with people. On Mission Street, streetcars and private and public carriages clogged the way. Hovering everywhere, and darting into the thoroughfare, was a swarm of boys with programs, searching out those with quarters to give.

The Fire Department was represented by one of its steamers, no. 13, and hose carts, with a full company of firemen. The engine's fires were kept banked, thus securing a ready supply of steam, in case necessity required it.

Outside of the Pavilion, on the sandlots bordering Eighth Street, the military arm of the government was represented by the California Light Battery, a dread detachment of stern-faced gunners. This company was given the matter of attending the 10-gun artillery. And, at the proper moment during the playing of the *Anvil Chorus*, these guns were discharged by electricity, the whole being governed by an operator seated upon the stage within the orchestra (Figure 5).

Inside the vast hall, looking toward the Market Street end, light streamed through the cracks of the warped planking. The distance almost seemed a mile. Advertisements of yeast powders, sausages, salt pork, and shirts were hanging over the gallery balustrades. The main floor was one solid mass of female loveliness and manly worth.

There were national dignitaries on visit from the coast, state dignitaries from Sacramento, and digni-

EDISON'S WONDERFUL INVENTION,
THE PHONOGRAPH

GRAND
MUSICAL FESTIVAL,
MECHANICS' PAVILION, SAN FRANCISCO,
MAY 28TH, 29TH AND 30TH, 2.30 P.M.



EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE:

A. M. BENHAM, SAM'L D. MAYER,
WENDELL EASTON

SUMNER W. BUGBEE, Manager.

Is on its way from New York to be Exhibited at the MAY FESTIVAL.
SAM'L HUBBARD, Agent.

FIGURE 5. This illustration, pirated from the program of the Musical Festival of 1870, depicts the interior of the fourth(!) Pavilion, which was abandoned in 1874.

taries from City Hall. There were gentlemen looking a little aguish, shivering in thin apparel constructed for the incandescent climates of the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys. And, gentlemen with complexions browned by the sea breezes of southern California climes. And, gentlemen with eyes red-rimmed from the San Francisco sand blasts.

The stage was a gently inclined plane, the advanced verge of which was seven feet above the main floor, and capable of seating the 200 members of the orchestra. Around the circumference were the anvils set to do their ponderous duty. And above, surrounding the orchestra, in a vast half-circle, rose the

seats of the chorus, tier upon tier, almost to the trusses of the roof, where there had been erected the mighty organ.

At quarter to three, the tall and graceful conductor, Carl Zerrahn, arrayed in a black frock-coat and a pair of lavender-colored trousers, stepped lightly down the hall of choristers to the front of the orchestra, made a profound bow to the house, then turned and executed a cabalistic sign to the chorus.

Instantly the 1800 rose to their feet with a motion so well timed that it seemed as if the whole south end of the Pavilion was rising up. And, as the 1800 scarlet-covered chorus books were hoisted into view, the whole amphitheater seemed aflame.

There was another motion, and with the precision of a machine, 50 bows scraped upwards over 50 fiddles, and 150 other instruments and 1800 melodious voices burst forth into the first magnificent note of the Sacred Festival-Overture on Luther's choral: *A Strong Castle Is Our Lord* by Otto Nicolai.

After describing the musical events of the afternoon, the *Chronicle* remarked:

To the disappointment of many, the promised exhibition of the phonograph was postponed in order to improve the facilities for hearing the wonderful mechanism speak and sing. The floors will be covered with sand to reduce the noise, and a large room is being prepared on the Eight Street side of the Pavilion. Here, two doors will be cut through to the Main Hall so that the audience can easily reach it.

Next day, Wednesday, May 29, the phonograph was indeed shown at the May Music Festival. The *Chronicle* reported at length:

Yesterday's tests were made under nearly every conceivable disadvantage with which a phonograph may reasonably fear to have to contend. The imperfectly boarded compartment had about the same acoustic properties as attach to a frontiersman's slab barn, and the ceaseless clatter of the choristers above, and the din and boom of the thousands outside the wide-cracked partitions, made a deafening noise, above which nothing could expect to make itself heard except a river steamboat's whistle, or any of the fiendish legion of small boys yelling "sooveneer."

The phonograph repeated the usual number of sentences entrusted to its keeping. The big hit yesterday was the rendition of an extravagant consumptive cough by Mr. Oeker, and the disconsolate comment, "Oh, my, what a bad cough I have." The tone was sepulchral, as if the cough had already consigned Mr. Phonograph to the grave, and brought down the house with laughter and applause.

The novelty that excited the thousands of promenaders on the last regular day of the May Festival, Thursday, May 30, was the Dynamo-Electric lights brought over from Oakland by Robert G. Brush. Six light bulbs flooded the vast interior of Mechanics' Pavilion. No mention was made of the phonograph.

A testimonial benefit concert was tendered Sumner W. Bugbee on Wednesday evening, June 5, at the Grand Opera House. All of the Festival principals participated. Bugbee was extolled to the heavens on high for his magnificent managerial achievements.

It would be gratifying to report that everyone and everything connected with the arrival of the phonograph in San Francisco in May, 1878, lived happily ever after. But, life is not so kind.

The exaltation of Sumner W. Bugbee by his peers and the city fathers was short-lived. Between June 11 and June 16, the *Chronicle*, which had provided him with such staunch support and publicity, turned, and published four articles excoriating him for mismanagement, foolish expenditures, thousands of dollars unaccounted for, and numerous unpaid bills—including \$1819.00 owed the *Chronicle* (June 16, 1878):

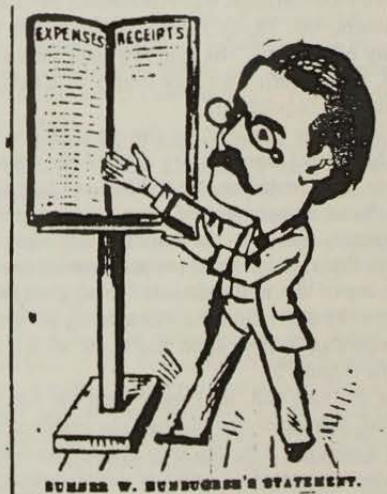


FIGURE 6. That is Sumner W. Bugbee. . . . The aria which the manager is rendering with his sweetest stomach notes . . . is written in G-sharp, some say too g. d. sharp. And the creditors respond, "Now is the Sumner of our discontent, made discontenter by this tuning fork that forks not over."



It was rumored that the principal singers—Whitney, Billings, Drasdil, Clarke, and Fessenden—were never paid for their services, and that they were obliged to return back East at their own expense. Rudolph Herold, one of the Festival choral conductors, died within months. Mechanics' Pavilion, with its warped side planking, was torn down and replaced with a new structure in 1881.

And interest by the citizens and newspapers of San Francisco in Edison's phonograph plummeted as precipitously as the fortunes and reputation of Bugbee. The jestful aside by the reporter from the *Chronicle* consigning the phonograph to the grave proved a harbinger of things to come. The last reference to the phonograph by San Francisco newspapers of that period was a piece in the *Morning Call* on Wednesday, June 12, the same day creditors descended upon Bugbee. It reported that Paul Oeker gave a demonstration of the Festival phonograph at the YMCA Hall, 232 Sutter Street, and "the machine squeaked out *La Marseillaise*."

And, it is a well-known fact that Edison himself lost interest in the phonograph for many years until 1886 or 1887, while he concentrated his prodigious energies toward the development of the electric light.

So, these have been the forgotten personalities—Faber, Ladd, Field, the fictitious Patchley, Russell, Hubbard, Oeker, Bugbee, and all the rest. Stephen D. Field, the electrician, was the first documented person in San Francisco to record his voice. Mrs. Stetson was the first documented person to warble into the apparatus' mouthpiece, and Schlott tried in vain to record the notes of his French horn.

It was a panorama of people brought together by a small machine with a crank, invented by a genius living far distant from the local scene. What better way to conclude than with a prognostication by a reporter from the *Alta California* (June 12):

. . . The phonograph of the present is, at best, but a wonderful toy, of no practical value. The phonograph of the future may rank among the great labor-saving inventions of the world.