

Thomas Edison announced his invention of the phonograph on the 21st of November, 1877. He wanted to "see a Phonograph in every American home."

This clip contains one of the earliest-known recordings made on an Edison-produced phonograph.

The device used wax cylinders (instead of tin foil) to record the speaking voice of the composer, Sir Arthur Sullivan, on October 5, 1888. (Sullivan was famous, among other things, for his "Gilbert and Sullivan" collaborations.)

Before we hear Sullivan speak—around 2:08 into this clip—we hear a musical recording (also believed to be from 1888). The music is part of Sullivan's "The Lost Chord"—a very famous work (at the time)—which was also referenced by James Joyce in *Ulysses*.

"The Lost Chord" was also played during a press conference—held on August 14, 1888—which introduced Thomas Edison's new phonograph to people in London, England.

The initial part of this clip represents the first-known recording of music—ever made—which is "listenable." (Note, however, that an earlier piece of recorded music—a 10-second clip of "Au Clair de la Lune"—was recently found. It was recorded by a phonautograph—a device created by the Parisian inventor, Edouard-Leon Scott—on the 9th of April, 1860.)

Covered by the mists of history are the names of the individuals who played the cornet and piano on "The Lost Chord" recording. It is believed they were British musicians.

The following are the words of Sullivan's recording, which was actually a message to Thomas Edison:

Dear Mr. Edison,

If my friend Edmund Yates [a British novelist and dramatist] has been a little incoherent it is in consequence of the excellent dinner and good wines that he has drunk. Therefore I think you will excuse him. He has his lucid intervals.

For myself, I can only say that I am astonished and somewhat terrified at the result of this evening's experiments: astonished at the wonderful power you have developed, and terrified at the thought that so much hideous and bad music may be put on record for ever.

But all the same, I think it is the most wonderful thing that I have ever experienced, and I congratulate you with all my heart on this wonderful discovery. Arthur Sullivan.

The Library of Congress provides interesting background on Edison's phonograph.

Credits:

Clip of historical recording on an Edison phonograph, online courtesy Library of Congress. Compilation of two early clips, maintained at the Library of Congress, online via YouTube.

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