

**The indication of rotation speed on the labels of the Soc. Nazionale del
"Grammofono" records in the ICBSA archives**
(Massimiliano Lopez)

When does the indication of rotation speed appear on record labels?

When does the standard use of this speed come into being?

The possibility of answering these questions inevitably passes through the analysis of documents and sources, whether they come from the historical archives of the record companies or directly from the record supports.

The purpose of this brief study is to verify the presence of speed indications on the labels of "78 rpm" records, using as a sample the sound carriers produced by the Società Nazionale del "Grammofono" in the period from its establishment in 1912 to its transformation into the Soc. Anonima "La Voce del Padrone" on October 22, 1937. All the records examined here belong to the ICBSA archives, of which only those already digitised will be analysed.

The decision to study the documents belonging to the above-mentioned record company stems, of course, from its relevance within the national market and from its being the Italian subsidiary of one of the world's largest phonographic companies, Gramophone - His Master's Voice. Another reason that makes this company an important tool for understanding the phenomenon is its chronological location: its span of activity falls, as we have previously said, entirely within a period that, as we will see later, witnesses the transition from a tendentially free use of the speed of rotation of the record supports to the progressive affirmation of a standard established on 78 rpm.

The search for discographic supports was carried out through the interface mask of the ICBSA's Polo SBN opac (<http://polodds.dds.it/opac2/DDS/ricercaAvanzata>) using the following parameters:

*Advanced search on Opac:
"Keyword": gramophone
"Support": record (78 rpm)*

The result of this search is a list of 3,057 audio carriers, of which 2,988 belong to the "Società Nazionale del Grammofono", including 2,261 documents of which a digital copy already exists.

A sample of 200 documents among those already digitised (the first in the list produced) yields the following results:

- records of the National Gramophone Society: 31
- records of the Società Anonima Nazionale del "Grammofono": 159

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	No. of media	with rpm indication	Without rpm indication	uncertain data
S.N. of "Gramophone"	31	4	25	2
S.A.N. of "Gramophone"	159	155	4	
other labels	10*			

*These are records by The Gramophone (4), Columbia (1) and La Voce del Padrone Spa (5).

From these results it is clear that the use of the rotation speed indication was an absolutely ordinary practice in the record production of the Società Anonima Nazionale del "Grammofono", and therefore in an era starting in 1927, while it is unusual in the first phase of the history of this company, when the company was called Società Nazionale del "Grammofono". This change of attitude is easily understandable on the basis of the link that the company, despite its changes in name, maintains with the English parent company, His Master's Voice; this link, as we shall see shortly, was decisive both in the adoption of the 78 rpm recording standard and in the reporting of this information on the record label.

Immediately evident in the comparison proposed with the following images, even the graphic model of the label adopted by the Italian company (first as Soc. Nazionale del "Grammofono" then as Soc. Anonima Nazionale del "Grammofono") repeats, beyond the colour used in these examples that depends only on the record series, the different

layout adopted by the contemporary English labels: same distribution of the spaces reserved for the discographic information with the presence or absence, in the lower right side, of the indication of the rotation speed.



The lower outer frame reads: "Record manufactured in Italy by the Società Nazionale del "Grammofono", Milan". The record can be dated not earlier than 1923 (given the presence of the DA Series) and 1927, the year in which the company became a joint-stock company (it is however an Italian reissue of the English edition recorded in October 1922). The label, which repeats the partition model of the contemporary Gramophone, does not show any indication of the rotation speed (see image below). (ICBSA inv. n.72444)



The lower outer frame reads: "Record manufactured in Italy by the by Società Anonima Nazionale del "Grammofono", Milan". The record can be dated between 1932 (year of the introduction of the GW series with blue label) and 1937, year of the transformation of the company into the Soc. Anonima "La Voce del Padrone". The new graphic layout of the label contains, as in the English version, the indication of the rotation speed placed in the lower right part of the label, above the editorial number of the record (ICBSA inv. n.262680)



His Master's Voice single-sided disc (1914)
(ICBSA inv. 260931)



His Master's Voice double sided disc. The dating of the disc, based on the writing on the lower arch, is after the month of February 1925 while for the type of label and record series it could be placed in the early thirties. (ICBSA inv. 275356)

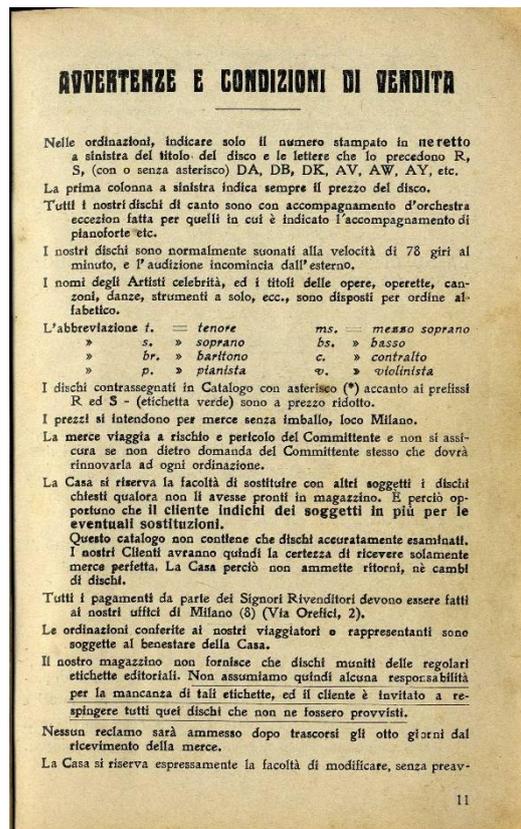
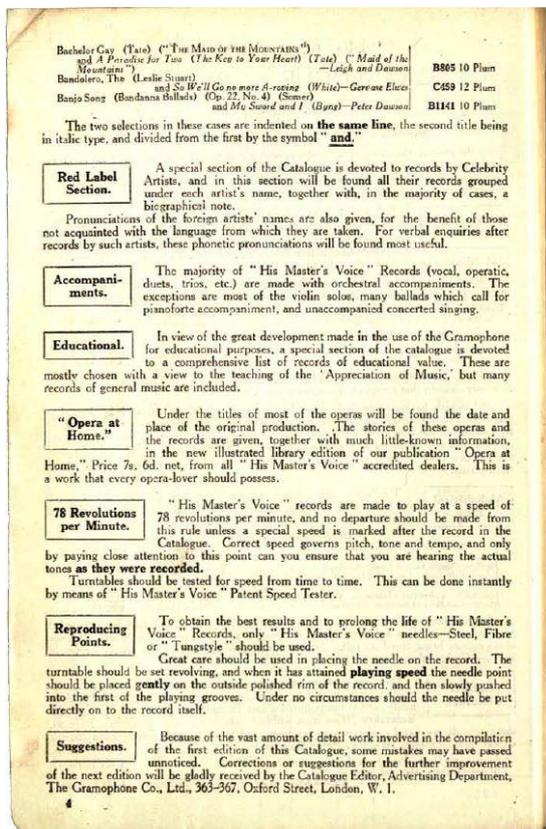
Therefore, according to the iconographic sources provided by the recordings of the Società Nazionale del "Grammofono", the introduction of a rotation standard and its indication on the label should become a customary reality in the mid-twenties.

To confirm this hypothesis, two important witnesses come to our aid.

The 1922 English General Catalogue "His Master's Voice" contains on page 4, in a section dedicated to illustrate the correct use of the catalog, the following sentence: "78 Revolutions per Minute: "His Master's Voice" records are made to play at a speed of 78 revolutions per minute, and no departure should be made from this rule unless a special speed is marked after the record in the catalogue. Correct speed governs pitch, tone and tempo, and only by paying close attention to this point can you ensure that you are hearing the actual tones as they were recorded.

Turntables should be tested for speed from time to time. This can be done instantly by means of "His Master's Voice" patented speed tester".

The contemporary catalog of the Società Nazionale del "Grammofono" does not contain the same information that we find, however, much more succinctly in the section "Warnings and Conditions of Sale" of the catalog of the same company in 1925.



Here on the left is page 4 of the English catalogue of His Master's Voice of 1922 where, within the various indications of use of the catalogue, the correct way to listen to records that are normally recorded at 78 rpm is clarified.

On the right, page 11 of the "Catalogo Generale dischi originali Grammofono" "La Voce del Padrone" of 1 December 1925: in the fourth paragraph it is much more succinctly stated that: "Our records are normally played at the speed of 78 rpm, and the audition begins from the outside". Unfortunately, there are no catalogues for the years 1923 and 1924 in the ICBSA archives. (ICBSA inv. 399753)

A second source is provided by the publication of "His Master's Voice" Records of Unique and Historical Interest, the Historical Catalogue No. 2 of the English company The Gramophone Co. Ltd. in which 428 recordings are listed, considered by the company to be an important record of the first phase of its activity. The catalogue contains recordings of important opera voices, performances by renowned performers and "historical voices" of British and international personalities (see the space dedicated to the Historical Catalogue no. 2 in the "Materials" section of this column).

The interest that this catalogue offers for the purposes of our study is given by the organisation of the discographic information: each recording is listed not only with the title and the performer, but also with a reference to the year of recording and to the rotation speed adopted when the sound was taken. The analysis of this information confirms the progressive consolidation of the use of 78 rpm as early as the second half of the 1910s, to become the sole practice by the mid 1920s. The date of publication of the Historical Catalogue, also present in the Italian catalogues since 1925 in the form of an excerpt on coloured pages, is not reported anywhere in the volume but can be derived from the dates contained within, which, starting from the oldest in 1900, arrive at the speeches of the Prince of Wales engraved in 1924. The decision to offer this publication to purchasers is an explicit recognition that the history of sound reproduction was entering a new phase in its life at that time: it is no coincidence that the introduction of electric engraving, the diffusion of radio and, shortly thereafter, the introduction of sound in the cinema all took place in those years.

(Translated with DeepL.com free version)