

# COLUMBIA RECORDS E SERIES, 1908-1923 (take 2)

## A revised and updated numerical list

by Dick Spottswood

In the 1970s, American discographic works began to include foreign-language accounts, starting with the Irish and Scandinavian-American studies by Pekka Gronow and others. Following his example, I had an opportunity to produce a comprehensive survey that covered everything I could learn about foreign-language discs and cylinders produced in the US and its territories between 1893 and 1942. The result was *Ethnic Music on Records* (EMOR) (University of Illinois, 1990). Some argued at the time that the work should include every sound recording published for foreign-language audiences regardless of point of origin. But, while that was an admirable goal, accurate discographic information (time and place of recording, participating musicians, matrix data) was usually unavailable for pre-1942 records originating abroad. Addressing that omission, this study documents records offered by the Columbia Graphophone Company's foreign language catalogs in North America during the 1908-1923 period, regardless of where the music was actually made.

While EMOR was in preparation, Bill (William R.) Bryant (1950-1995) compiled a handwritten list of Columbia's E1 - E9112 series, created for European and Near East language discs from 1908 through 1923, when the company replaced it with multiple -F suffixed series. Each was numbered for a separate language or nationality, i.e.

1-F Bohemian (Czech)  
1000-F Croatian  
2000-F Danish  
3000-F Finnish, etc.

While Bill was generously sharing information with me, I was able to reciprocate with information relating to his documentation of small and budget record labels from the 1890s through the 1920s. At the time of his premature death, Bill had organized a wealth of material that has been since been published by Allan Sutton's Mainspring Press in Denver, Colorado. At the time of this writing, Allan has retired much of Mainspring's print publishing arm, and I am grateful to him for including the E list among the other fascinating features on his active blog site.

With roughly 6535 releases during the 1908-23 period, Columbia's foreign catalog was considerably more prolific than its domestic A1 - A4001 counterpart, with around 3935 issues. Major language groups were represented along with many minor ones, and both catalogs included popular and classical music. There were two primary reasons to maintain an active foreign list: if Columbia wanted to sell its Grafonola (brand) phonographs, it had to produce records for diverse audiences, even if some sold only to small populations in limited quantities—think Albanian, Welsh or Icelandic. Records thus served as loss leaders that encouraged Grafonola purchases by all customers who, Columbia hoped, would buy from its larger

catalogs too. Secondly, Columbia was an international company that could both import masters from Europe and profit from reissues of US-made records abroad. One other acquisition helped too: Columbia numbers between E6000 and E6140 were drawn from the Favorite label in Germany before World War 1 and stayed in print for years. After 1914, when war interrupted trade between America and Europe, Columbia (and others) sought and developed immigrant talent in New York and Chicago for new records. Foreign lists expanded accordingly, some emigré artists became stars, and popular postwar records in many languages sold on both continents as evolving tastes everywhere began to include jazz, show tunes and other American music.

This work is not a discography, mostly because only minimal documentation survives from scattered sources, primarily surviving pressings, label copy proof sheets and vintage catalogs. The spread sheet format is not ideal, but it allows users to sort and display by matrix number, title, performer etc., with separate rows for altered label credits. Dance music often had international appeal and, in some cases, a single release appeared with varying title and artist credits according to marketing needs. Two records by I Quattro Siciliani (The Four Sicilians), E3680 and E3833, are examples of this confusing practice, which seems to have peaked in 1917-18. Multiple issues from a single matrix were also assigned new catalog numbers and credited in various ways.

Little original documentation survives for most of these records. Most from the years 1910-1915 comes from Tim Brooks' and Brian Rust's *Columbia Master Book Discography* (Greenwood Press, 1999), and identifying other dates and places of recording is speculative. Columbia numbered its disc record masters from 1 to 704234. The high number belongs to the last record in a Spanish language matrix series, made by the Estrellas Cubanas in July 1933. Chronologically, the final matrix was 114014 by the Irish singer Frank Quinn, made in January 1935. By then, Columbia was a division of the American Record Corporation, and the parent label was used almost exclusively for classical and foreign language material. Subsequent records on Columbia, Melotone, Vocalion, Perfect etc. were numbered uniformly with other ARC matrices.

Columbia's E series records first appeared in 1908, when discs with music on both sides superseded single-siders and became the industry standard. Columbia had already created separate blocks for non-US masters. As time passed, additional matrix series were added, encoding a bewildering number of blocks for ten- and twelve-inch discs, domestic popular and classical music, products, trial and test records and more. Unfortunately, no reliable guide to these series survives, though the *Columbia Master Book Discography* includes a good attempt to make sense of them. Here I've often resorted to educated guesses and I welcome any further enlightenment!

This is a second draft, with many updates added since it was posted in August. Special thanks to intrepid historians Pekka Gronow, Tim Brooks, Steve Smolian, Giuliana Fugazzotto, Rainer Lotz, Allan Sutton, Hugo Strötbaum, David Giovannoni, Filip Šír, Christian Zwarg, Patrick Feaster, Mark McDaniel, Jim Cartwright (of Immortal Performances, Inc. in Austin, Texas), Peter Shambarger, Kostas Bournas, Avgeris Fakiris, Andy Moyer, Bill Dean Myatt, Anita Pesce, Jessica Wood and her colleagues on the New York Public Library staff, with abject apologies to anyone I've forgotten!

There are still many blanks, and with luck more information will be added. To organize data, I've used an Excel spread sheet. Each entry begins with Columbia catalog numbers and there are a minimum of two, representing each double-side disc. As noted above, when a number appears more than twice, it reflects Columbia's occasional practice of re-labeling releases for different markets without assigning new catalog numbers. If the display area was larger, columns would be wider and I'd be able to include more. As it is, information occasionally vanishes on the right unless you adjust the screen.

Thanks and best wishes,

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