

Phonography in Italy and its reception in the first half of the Twentieth Century

At the onset of the twentieth century in Italy, unlike in many other European countries no debate had emerged concerning the role of recorded music. While gramophone records were indeed widely used, no cultural significance was attached to them, as they were merely seen as consumption goods. This perception started to change in the 1920s and 1930s, as a result of several factors. Among these were significant technical improvements, brought about by the introduction of electrical recording, as well as the role that phonographic recording played in the work of early ethnomusicologists, who saw it as a vital instrument and sought to promote it accordingly; the activity of ethnographer Gavino Gabriel, who encouraged the use of gramophones in Italian schools, eventually led to them being officially adopted by the government for the purposes of teaching. Above all, however, the most important change stemmed from the widespread diffusion of the radio; the debate it sparked inevitably involved the role of the gramophone as well, and led to the definition of the relative merits, and different usages, of the two appliances. As a result, a sharp distinction, which had begun to take shape since the beginning of the century, emerged between the two; while the role of the radio was confined to broadcasting, the gramophone, by contrast, came to be considered the means by which sound could be stored and preserved. Indeed, such a distinction might well reflect the idealist philosophy of Benedetto Croce, which enjoyed a high consideration in Italy at that time.