The Italian-American Record Labels

The last chapter of this study is dedicated to discussing the role of the record industry, a difficult task considering the scarcity of sources. The role of the American record industry is fundamental because the emergence of records at the beginning of the twentieth century helped music move from being folk music to becoming a consumer product. The first record labels, limited to popular material, were considered archival institutions, dedicated to the preservation of music by placing it on a stable, solid medium. Music, then, no longer had to rely on being passed along by oral means only, such as by musical productions that remained in great part primarily folk art in inspiration, vocalization, themes, and instrumental arrangements. But music’s transference onto the disc created a method of diffusion different from the direct transmission of traditional folk music. Above all, however, recorded music gave rise to the wide distribution and internationalization of the repertoire, something that had been unthinkable until then. This aspect transformed folk music into popular music and made possible the birth of a genre that took the name “dance music.” In Italy, the term was translated as “ballabili,” and this music spread the African-Latin-American repertoire to local, deeply rooted traditional repertoires such as the Neapolitan.

What Ruth Glasser emphasizes in regard to the Dominican Republic also applies to some extent to all the ethnic repertoires at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the occupation of Haiti by the Americans between 1915 and 1934, the music of this part of the Hispaniola island, which includes the Dominican Republic on the east coast, was literally
invaded by both North American and Cuban models. In part, this happened through radio programs and records imported from the United States. The occupation of the Dominican Republic, which lasted from 1916 to 1924, had substantially the same result. The Dominican Republic began to import American records beginning in 1913. These included *danzas, danzones, canciones, zarzuelas*, operas, and two-steps. Notwithstanding the clear Hispanic-American origins of these models, none of the records were Dominican products. It was necessary to wait until 1928 to hear a record produced in the Dominican Republic by a Dominican artist.

In the meantime, the most important singer of the country, Eduardo Brito, who recorded for Victor in New York, had grown up imitating Cuban music, which he had heard from records circulating in his native city. This led to the paradox of Brito being contracted as a Cuban singer, which concealed his true origins. This situation was perfectly in line with the musical heritage he and the vast audience of Latin American listeners shared.¹

The spread of recorded music provoked a loss or derailment of cultural identity, a process that, from the beginning of the era of recorded music to the present, has never ceased. From this observation, one can say that record music transformed the popular folk repertoires, taking from them their peculiarities and unique qualities and subjecting them to that phenomenon of globalization in which we are currently still immersed. However, it is equally true, as far as the beginning is concerned, that music destined for the consumer preserved many traditions that otherwise would have been lost. Among these I can count the traditions of the Neapolitan song, which took steps to defend and renew itself thanks to its very contact with other repertoires.

The production and distribution of certain types of music was based upon economic considerations above all others, and such considerations occupied the center of attention among record companies, which selected artists not solely based on the catchiness of their music or its adaptability to dance, but also on the basis of demographic factors, such as the density of a certain population in a given area. Moreover, record companies based their decisions on geographical and economic considerations, such as roads that were already trading routes, and political ones as well. The tight economic ties between the United States and Latin American countries have played an important role in the exchange of musical repertoires over many years. Thus, by the beginning of the 1920s, US broadcasters had established affiliate radio stations and film and music companies throughout Central and South America and were thus able to control this territory.

Returning to the Italian context, the exchange of stimuli and repertoires between the United States and Latin America was transposed not