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Singers on Radio

From the beginning of radio broadcasting, the singing voice has been a staple. While some early microphones had trouble adequately carrying powerful voices (the carbon powder would congeal, cutting off sound transmission), as technology improved, vocal music and musical variety became—and have remained—radio’s program norm.

Origins

Many pioneer stations used local singers who craved audiences and would gladly perform free for the honor of singing on radio. Early announcers were often selected for their singing ability, as they could be called upon to fill unused air time at a moment’s notice. (There were pianos in many early studios for just this purpose.) When WEAJ dedicated its New York City studio on Broadway in 1923, the broadcast featured an assortment of singers ranging from opera stars to popular songsters. Indeed, well over 60 percent of radio air time in the 1920s was devoted to some form of music, often singing.

Reginald Fessenden engineered the first broadcast of a human voice—as distinguished from transmissions of Morse code—in December 1906. His broadcast included a recording of Handel’s “Largo,” a tenor aria from the opera *Scipio*. Fessenden himself sang a Christmas song, thus becoming the first person to sing live on radio. Fessenden’s audience was made up mostly of radio operators at sea in the North Atlantic off the coast of Brant Rock, Massachusetts. About two months later, in February 1907, vaudeville performer Eugenia Farrar became the first woman to sing live on radio when she performed “I Love You Truly” as part of a similar broadcasting experiment by radio pioneer Lee de Forest.

It would be another 13 years before radio broadcasting as it is known today had its true beginning. But from the earliest days of radio, listeners left little doubt about what they wanted to hear. For example, in 1922 listeners responding to a poll by WBAY (later WEAJ) in New York City said that music was what they most enjoyed hearing on radio. But their tastes in music were widely divergent, just as they are today. Various factions wanted to hear dance music, symphony concerts, old-time ballads, religious hymns, and brass band selections,

among other styles. One decision that played a large role in determining the type of music and singers to be heard on the radio came following World War I when Congress decided that radio broadcasting would be a commercial enterprise. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, who guided the fledgling industry in its earliest days, was aghast: “It is inconceivable that we should allow so great a possibility for service, for news and entertainment, for education and vital commercial purposes, to be drowned in advertising chatter.” However, the decision to support the operation of radio broadcasting through advertising helped to ensure that most of the music broadcast on radio eventually would be popular in nature.

Early radio broadcasters were image-conscious, and operas played a major role in the content of early radio programs. Broadcasts by operatic vocalists and orchestras generated a wider appreciation for “fine music,” often among those who previously had little interest in music of any kind. As classical music impresario Sol Hurok said:

People who own sets look up programs to find out what is being broadcast. They read that an aria from *La Boheme* will be sung that night. They become interested and ask themselves, “What is *La Boheme*?” . . . In this way an interest in music is created which is beneficial because all of the listeners are prospective attendants.

Evidence of this came from the sale of phonograph recordings. Early on, phonograph record manufacturers were hostile to radio, as the sale of records initially dropped noticeably following the emergence of radio. In response, the Victor Talking Machine Company (which would later become part of RCA Victor) kept almost all of its major artists off the air, reasoning that if listeners could hear singers free over the radio, no one would pay for their records.

But by late 1924, more visionary ideas had prevailed. Victor announced “the beginning of a new era in radio broadcasting.” The company would feature its greatest recording artists in a series of radio programs. Every selection was, or soon would be, available on Victor’s prestigious Red Seal label. On New Year’s Day 1925, two of Victor’s most popular singers,