



Audio's Oldest Dog

by Robert Angus

This year, the world's most reproduced painting celebrates its 75th anniversary. No, it's not the Mona Lisa or a work by Rembrandt or Gainsborough, it's a portrait of a nondescript bull terrier by a 19th century photographer-turned-painter named Francis Barraud. Chances are you have at least one copy of the painting in your home right now — not on the wall, but on a phonograph record, television set, transistor radio, or tape cartridge.

The painting, in case you haven't already guessed, is called "His Master's Voice," and is reproduced as a trade mark by RCA in Canada, the Victor Company of Japan, the Gramophone Co. Ltd. in Great Britain, and by affiliates of Electrical & Musical Industries Ltd. (EMI) around the world. It features Barraud's dog, Nipper, with an acoustical phonograph.

Considering how famous Nipper has become, there's surprisingly little information about him. He was born in or near Bristol, England, in 1884; and was acquired by the Barrauds at a very young age. "I can re-

member my father telling me how his father came home one night and dropped on the bed of his two small sons a wriggling three-month-old puppy," E. M. Barraud has written.

"Nipper was not a thoroughbred. If you look at the picture, you can see the streak of bull-terrier in the broad chest, and Father said that if once Nipper got hold of an adversary (and he never hesitated to take on another dog of any size or breed) it was very difficult to make him let go."

Barraud senior was scenic artist at the Princess Theatre in Bristol at the time; and, when he had to take a curtain call, Nipper would walk on stage with him. The artist died at the age of 39, and Nipper attached himself to Francis Barraud, a brother who had a photographic studio in Liverpool. In the early 1890s, Francis moved to London, where he switched from photography to painting.

At the time, Barraud had recently purchased an Edison cylinder phonograph and some recordings for his studio. One day, he noticed Nipper apparently listening intently to a recording. It appeared to

Francis Barraud that the dog had mistaken the scratchy voice on the cylinder for that of his dead master. The artist sketched quickly; and, within a few days, he had what he considered an appealing oil painting which he called "His Master's Voice."

For some reason, nobody else was much impressed with it; and after a time, Barraud filed it with his other unsold paintings. Then, one September day in 1899, he was passing the shop of the Gramophone & Typewriter Company in Maiden Lane, when he noticed a phonograph in the window with a shiny brass horn, billed as the Improved Gramophone. Perhaps, he thought, the trouble with "His Master's Voice" lay in the black japanned horn of the Edison phonograph. The background of the painting was dark, so perhaps there wasn't enough contrast. Or maybe Edison's horn just looked old-fashioned.

In any event, Barraud walked into the shop and asked to see the manager. He was sent up to see William Barry Owen, the company's general manager. Barraud explained about the painting, and

flat, however — there are usually a few wiggles. But, more important, there is almost invariably a droop at each end (hence the name **response curve** for such a graph) because it is relatively more difficult for an amplifier to function at the extreme ends of its range. For this reason, many of the better pieces of equipment are designed to operate through a range much wider than the audio band, placing the drooping ends well out of hearing range and the flat middle part between 20 Hz and 20 kHz. This explains why some equipment specifies response over what seems to be an unnecessarily wide range.

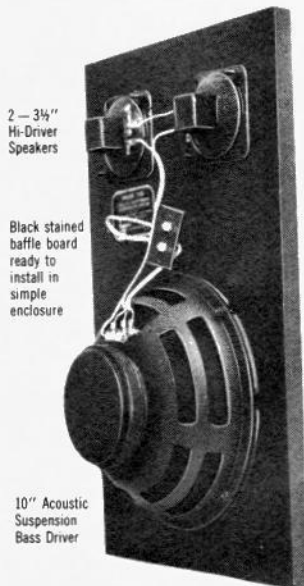
It is important also to realize that *frequency range* and *frequency response* are not the same thing. One often runs across specs like "Frequency response: 18 Hz to 17 kHz," but this is incomplete because it says nothing about the linearity of the response. The response graph could look like the Matterhorn and this sort of spec would still be descriptive as long as there was *some* output at the end of the stated range. Instead, response specs should always be in the form: "18 Hz to 17 kHz ± 1 dB."

The **decibel (dB)** is one of the most troublesome things for the audio tyro to grasp, and I shall defer discussion of it until a later column, except to say that it is a logarithmic unit that expresses the ratio between two sound levels (a sound that has twice the level of another is said to be 3 dB greater).

In the frequency response graph described above, the vertical unit is the decibel; and the 'flatness' of the curve is expressed as plus or minus a certain number of dB. Thus our hypothetical "18 Hz to 17 kHz ± 1 dB" means that, for a given input voltage, the amplifier's output at any frequency in the stated range will be within 1 dB of the reference zero point (usually set arbitrarily at 1 kHz). As a very general rule of thumb, the maximum acceptable variance should be about 3 dB, with 1 dB being more typical of high-quality equipment.

Finally, any bumps and wiggles in the response curve should be gradual. Sharp changes in response usually indicate resonances, and these can be very nasty — but that will have to wait for another time. ■

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asked if he could borrow an Improved Gramophone horn for a week or two. Owen gave him the horn, and requested that Barraud bring the painting along with him when he returned it. Since Nipper had died in 1895, Barraud merely painted the Gramophone horn over Edison's. A few days later, he was back in Owen's office.

The Gramophone salesman agreed that "His Master's Voice" had plenty of human interest. He bought it, hung it on the wall of his office, and promptly forgot all about it. The following year, Emile Berliner, the American who had patented the flat record, visited Owen in London and saw the painting in his office. He asked Owen for the North American rights; and, on July 1, 1900, he received a US Copyright.

Owen wasn't using the picture as a trade mark, as he already had one showing a cherub inscribing something on a disc, which had proved very successful. But Berliner had an associate — Eldridge Johnson of Camden, New Jersey, who had made the Improved Gramophone in the first place — who thought it was just the thing to help launch his new Consolidated Talking Machine Company. Accordingly, Consolidated's first phonographs and records featured Nipper on the machine or the label. It was to be nine years before Owen scrapped his cherub in favor of Barraud's dog.

Actually, though the flesh-and-blood Nipper died in 1895, he still lives on in the hearts and minds of the Gramophone Company's directors, Barraud's original painting hangs in the company's head office in Hayes, Middlesex; and if you look at it closely, you'll see traces of the Edison phonograph buried beneath the Improved Gramophone.

When Nipper died (depending on which version of the story you believe), Barraud buried him either in the garden behind his studio in Melina Place, St. John's Wood; beneath a mulberry tree on Eden Street, Kingston-on-Thames, some eight miles from the Gramophone plant in Hayes; or a combination of the two — i.e. he was buried in St. John's Wood and later moved to Kingston-on-Thames. Today, a bank stands on the latter site, and on it is a brass plaque commemorating the grave, erected in 1949 by the directors of a grateful company.

Barraud, in the declining years of his life, gave up the unprofitable career of a serious painter (his works had hung in the Royal Academy and other galleries) to make more money painting copies of his portrait of Nipper.

In the half-century that followed, there was a close working relationship between the British-owned Gramophone Company and Eldridge Johnson's Consolidated (which, within a year, had become the Victor Talking Machine Company with Emile Berliner as a principal, and had spawned the Berliner Talking Machine Company of Montreal). Nipper, and such artists as Enrico Caruso, Francesco Tammagno, Emma Calve, and others, held the companies together.



Francis Barraud painting copies of his own original painting, "His Master's Voice".

Gramophone sold Johnson's Improved Gramophones in England, and it and Victor divided up the world between them. The Gramophone Company soon had branches in Germany, Russia, Spain, France, Italy, and elsewhere, all using the Nipper trademark. In North America, Johnson set up branches in Montreal and Mexico. Later, there was a Victor branch in Japan, and Gramophone branches followed the expansion of the British Empire to India, Australia, and South Africa.

Eldridge Johnson was a firm believer in advertising. By 1910, you couldn't pick up a magazine or newspaper without seeing Nipper. The Berliner factory was shipping not only thousands of phonographs during the 1910-1920 heyday of the

disc, but also hundreds of *papier-maché* and plaster likenesses of Nipper for use by Victrola dealers in showrooms and display windows from Moosonee to Port Dover, and from Halifax to Victoria. If you walked into a music store in Toronto or Winnipeg during this period, you'd have found a plaster Nipper standing guard over each Victrola on the floor.

World War I brought the first strains in the Gramophone-Victor alliance. The former's branch in Hanover, Germany, seceded from the Gramophone confederation in 1914, renaming itself Deutsche Grammophon and selling cut-rate Carusos in the United States. These platters and others made for export carried the "Opera Disc" label, but records made for sale within Germany continued to feature Nipper. In 1926, Gramophone fought back by founding Electrola in Germany, which carries the Nipper trademark to this day.

By the 1920s, Nipper's likeness was available to dealers in flashing neon; and Victor and Gramophone had limited DGG's insurgency to Germany through patent and trademark infringement suits.

Then, on January 4, 1929, Nipper made a momentous leap — from gramophones to radios. On that date, the Radio Corporation of America purchased The Victor Company and its Canadian subsidiary, the Victor Company of Canada, and created the RCA Victor Record Division. At the time, RCA executives weren't terribly happy about either Nipper or the phonograph business. They had high hopes for converting Victor's manufacturing facilities to the production of radios, and making Victor dealers into sales outlets for them. As for Nipper, the RCA men were much more interested in their own corporate symbol, established in 1922 — the letters RCA in a circle.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the Gramophone Company experienced the twin hardships of competition from the radio and the depression, before its merger with the Columbia Graphophone Co. and Parlophone into Electric & Musical Industries took place in March, 1931. Though RCA was playing down Nipper and records generally in the United States (while marketing a "His Master's Voice" line in

Canada), EMI featured Barraud's terrier not only on phonographs, radios, and records, but on a line of other electrical products. On the surface, the relationship between Victor and Gramophone continued as usual.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and started a chain of events that caused history to repeat itself. During the war years, Victor's subsidiary in Tokyo, Nippon Victor, severed all connections with the parent in Camden, N.J.; but refused to relinquish rights to Nipper. After the war, RCA renegotiated leasing agreements with the Victor Company of Japan, now owned by Panasonic. In Japan, you can still see the neon outlines of Barraud's painting glowing on office buildings at night, or five-foot-high *papier-maché* Nippers guarding the entrances to record stores in small towns.

By January 1955, it had become obvious to executives of RCA and EMI that there were new worlds to conquer, and that they couldn't be conquered with the old working relationships. Accordingly, EMI bought Capitol Records in the US and Canada; and a lot of recordings bearing the Nipper trademark in Europe began appearing in direct competition to RCA Victor, under the Capitol and Angel trademarks here (EMI had revived its cherub inscribing a disc in 1953). At the same time, RCA began recording abroad and issuing Elvis Presley, the Boston Pops, and Chet Atkins under the RCA trademark in Europe, in direct competition with EMI. By early 1968, Nippon Victor had gotten into the act — not with records, but with television sets, radios, and tape recorders exported to Canada and the United Kingdom under the Nivico and JVC labels.

As the international complications increased, Nipper's picture began to shrink on products in England, the US, and here. Eventually it disappeared altogether from some, to be replaced by the EMI globe trade mark or the RCA circle.

Then, RCA president Robert Sarnoff sent out the word — Nipper, at the ripe old age of 70, was to be retired. As a headline writer at the *New York Times* put it, "His Master's Voice Says 'Scram'." Nipper, Sarnoff was to write in *Saturday Review*, reflected a bygone era. The

acoustic phonograph may be very pretty and full of nostalgia, Sarnoff continued, but it wasn't progressive — didn't reflect the image of a huge international firm engaged in space communications, defense contracting, and other fields. Besides, he said, Barraud's painting was getting very difficult to reproduce, particularly on small products like tape cassettes and transistor radios. Instead, RCA shelled out a reported \$1.2 million for a new trade mark that Barraud could have painted with one hand tied behind him — the letters RCA in space-age type which RCA Ltd. has been using for the past five years.

But what about Nipper? Was he really being sent to that great kennel in the sky? Not a bit of it. By the time Sarnoff got around to making the new trade mark official, Nipper had won a reprieve. "The dog symbol will be kept in modified form on

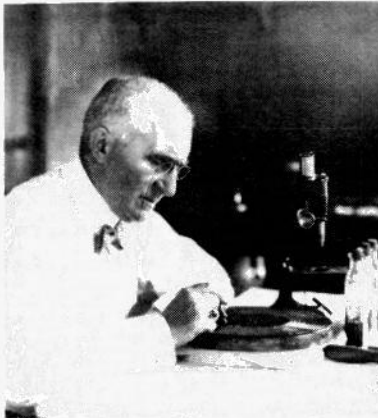
products of the RCA Record Division," Sarnoff said, hedging against possible consumer resentment. "It is conceivable that he might reappear on certain products in the future."

Sarnoff hadn't become a dog lover during this period. Company lawyers pointed out to him that, if RCA abandoned Nipper altogether, EMI or JVC might very well begin marketing their products under the trade mark. Under Canadian law, you've got to use a trade mark or lose the right to it.

So Happy birthday, Nipper. You've survived two world wars, a devastating depression, company mergers and warfare, two attempts to kill you off, and 75 years in the record business. Chances are we'll be seeing more of you in the years to come, for you're a dog with a difference. As E.M. Barraud said of you, it was very difficult to make you let go. ■

EMILE BERLINER:

FATHER OF CANADA'S RECORD INDUSTRY



Emile Berliner was born on May 20, 1851 in Hanover, Germany. He emigrated to the USA at the age of 19, and lived in New York City and Washington, working at assorted jobs and using his spare time to study electricity and acoustics. In 1877 he built a small laboratory in his boarding house, and began experimenting with Bell's new telephone. He evolved the idea of the loose contact microphone, which was eventually used in all Bell telephones and which put the telephone on an advanced commercial basis. In 1878 his findings were sold to Bell for \$100,000, and he was given a position with that company as a consultant.

In 1887 he gave the world the flat record (the first 'Gramophone' records were 5" hard rubber discs).

In 1893 he formed the United States Gramophone Company, and worldwide success soon followed. 1897 saw the Gramophone Company form in Great Britain, and in 1898 the German Deutsche Grammophon was started.

On February 24, 1897, a Canadian patent was taken out, and a company was set up in Montreal in 1899 to establish a catalogue for the specialized French Canadian market. Berliner's connections with Bell proved valuable, and the first factory was in the Bell building on Aqueduct Street in Montreal.

Canada's first record was produced on January 2, 1900; and the same year saw the use of the Nipper portrait on all Canadian recordings. By 1902, Berliner was able to announce that over 3 million records had been sold in Canada in the first full year of production; and, by 1905, he had moved his enlarged staff and facilities into his own plant on Lenoir Street in Montreal.

In 1924, the Berliner Company was bought by its US affiliate and became the Victor Talking Machine Company of Canada. In 1926 the entire firm was bought by a group of bankers, and was acquired by the Radio Corporation of America just three years later.

Emile Berliner suffered a stroke in late July 1929, and died a week later in his 79th year. (E.W.)