Phonography

Small Wonder: The AA Graphophone

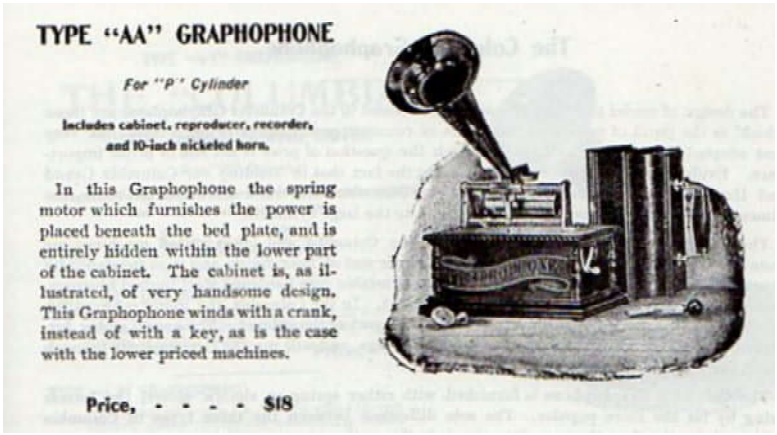
by George E. Paul



Of all the talking machines marketed by the three largest U.S. companies (Victor, Edison, and Columbia), only a handful of models might be considered "a flash in the pan"; existing for only a brief period before disappearing forever. Edison's 1913 Amberola IV is one good example of this genre.[1] Over a decade later, a few new Victor Victrolas appeared just before the introduction of the Orthophonic line in 1925, and were quickly discontinued due to their almost immediate obsolescence. But in both these instances, the machines were doomed by their dated technology, if nothing else. This article will examine an earlier example—a cylinder Graphophone that was cataloged for only two years, yet was available for at least five. It was born in the shadow of great new things, and never quite emerged from its semi-obscurity. This was the Graphophone Type AA.



Very little has been written about the AA; indeed at first glance there seems to be little to relate. Its first known appearance was in the July 15, 1901 Columbia catalog. In ascending order, it followed the various Q and Eagle Graphophones, and its description was written in the context of these lesser machines:



TYPE "AA" GRAPHOPHONE

For "P" Cylinder

Includes cabinet, reproducer, recorder, and 10-inch nickeled horn.

In this Graphophone the spring motor which furnishes the power is placed beneath the bed plate, and is entirely hidden within the lower part of the cabinet. The cabinet is, as illustrated, of very handsome design. This Graphophone winds with a crank, instead of with a key, as is the case with the lower priced machines.

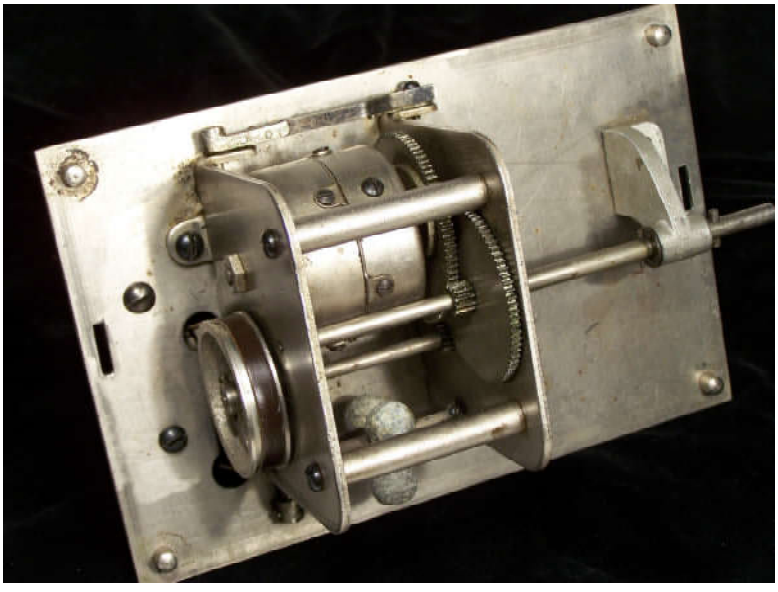
Price, - - - - $18

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The next Graphophone in line was the Type AT for $25.00, but for



$18.00 the purchaser of an AA received, in addition to the attractive cabinet and Eagle-type reproducer, a recorder and a 10-inch nickeled horn. Compared to the $12 cased Eagle, the AA was a very good value considering the recorder was a $5.00 extra and the nickeled horn sold for 45 cents more than the Eagle's conical black horn. Nothing was mentioned of the highly polished nickel-plated mechanism of the AA (which treatment had commanded a $3.00 surcharge when briefly offered on the Eagle in 1898-99). Nor was one major technological advance noted which was eventually adopted on nearly all Graphophones playing standard-size cylinders with floating reproducers: the "drop frame."[2] By raising the carriage slide bar and/or modifying the trunnion (depending on the model), the reproducer became horizontal when lowered into playing position. This allowed the maximum amount of weight to be brought to bear on the stylus, improving tracking (and slightly increasing volume). Much would be made of this development by Columbia's copy writers over the next few years as the design was incorporated into new versions of older models, and new machines as well.[3] Yet the 1901 catalog failed to point out this new feature on the AA. All in all, the AA was introduced with virtually no fanfare.



However, it should be remembered that in mid-1901, the American Graphophone Company was feverishly preparing its new Disc Graphophones for introduction in the fall. Columbia clearly saw the bright future of disc talking machines, and a relatively-inexpensive cylinder model probably did not generate much enthusiasm in Bridgeport. Undoubtedly, the AA was intended primarily as a price-point cylinder machine between the $12.00 Eagle and the $25.00 AT.

This price-point was largely negated in the 1902 Columbia catalog, when the cost of the AT was lowered to $20.00. The AA, which had seemed such a good value in 1901 compared to the Eagle, was by 1902 priced at only $2.00 below the AT, with its larger cabinet, larger longer-running motor, and a 14-inch aluminum horn. It's no wonder the AT sold like hot cakes. The little AA, despite its visual appeal, began to disappear into that phonographic limbo where unpopular machines live out their ghost-like existence.

By 1903, both the Eagle and the AA had been dropped from the Columbia catalog. The standard-size cylinder Graphophone line at that point consisted of machines in ten-dollar



increments of price (excepting the modest QC at $7.50): The QQ for $10.00; the AT for $20.00; and the AO for $30.00.

Yet, like the Eagle, the AA continued to be produced for several more years. A few Type AA Graphophones have been seen with 1904 St. Louis award decals on their cabinets, and at least one example with a 1906 Milan award decal has been reported. The mystery of who was selling these late-production Type AAs may be at least partially answered by a period label found on the paper envelope containing instructions for one of these machines. It reads: "International Phonographic Language Schools, 59 Dearborn Street, Chicago."[4] Other language schools or small retailers/catalog houses may account for some of these late-production AA Graphophones, but similar evidence has not yet been seen.

The Type AA Graphophone made virtually no impact on the industry,[5] and aside from its unheralded use of what would become known as the "drop frame," offered little novelty to the talking machine customer of the 1901-1906 period. The attractive little AA Graphophone was overshadowed by the new Disc Graphophones that appeared about 90 days later. Within a year it was encroached upon by the newly-reduced Type AT, and was soon banished from Columbia's catalog. Today it is virtually forgotten, even by most collectors, unless they take a few moments to acquaint themselves with this charming wraith of nearly 120 years ago.



NOTES:

1) Appearing by October 1913, the Amberola IV's mechanism consisted of a Standard upper works mated to the spring motor of a Home. While functional, most prospective customers probably expected more than a single-mainspring motor in a floor model priced at $100.00. The attractive craftsman cabinet might have drawn buyers had a more modern, robust mechanism been supplied. The Edison factory fire of December 1914 sealed the fate of the already-failed Amberola IV.

2) The Types AP, Q, and AQ never adopted a true drop frame, although their reproducers assumed nearly the same position as those with the new design.

3) In the February 21, 1903 issue of *The Music Trade Review*, an article on the newly-released Type AO proudly stated, "The main frame has been entirely remodeled so as to permit the reproducer to rest horizontally on the record. This important feature…assures absolutely automatic adjustment of the reproducer."

4) Thanks to Chuck Azzalina for providing this documentation.

5) Production of the AA was approximately 13,000 units.