

# SHATTERED

BY LESSER OF 2 WEEVILS - 2022

## Episode 5

[Shattered theme music]

**NEMO:** In the early 1900s, the great and good at the Paris Opera buried an urn full of “living voices”—Gramophone recordings of famous opera stars—to be disinterred after a century. When those urns were opened, mysterious recordings, similar to experiments done by Alexander Graham Bell at the Volta Laboratories in Washington D.C. in 1881, were discovered. Who made them? And why?

[Phonograph recording.]

**COUNT PHILIPPE DE CHAGNY:** *Qui sème le vent, récolte la tempête.* [As you sow, so shall you reap.]

**NEMO:** And who wrote the haunting music captured on this piano roll from the early 1900s?

[Excerpt from piano roll.]

**PHIL:** This podcast will investigate the mysterious happenings in turn-of-the-twentieth century Paris at one of its most popular cultural institutions, the Paris Opera, now the Palais Garnier. I’m Phil Donan, and with my colleague—

**NEMO:** --we’re going to use research, sound recording playback technology, and good old-fashioned detective work to try to find you the answers.

**PHIL:** I am really starting to get into this.

**NEMO:** You don’t think it’s too dramatic?

**PHIL:** No, because I always seem to come in and undercut it with humor.

**NEMO:** Yes, you do. Doth you protest too much, methinks?

**PHIL:** Well, that’s not good grammar at all.

**NEMO:** So welcome back to *The Shattered Podcast*.

**PHIL:** Indeed, welcome to our crazy world.

**NEMO:** Hey, I'm not crazy.

**PHIL:** Neither am I.

**NEMO:** You just said—

**PHIL:** I mean, I mean our investigations are a little arcane and eccentric. But irresistible.

**NEMO:** Maybe now is a good time to lay out the facts as we know them?

**PHIL:** Good idea.

**NEMO:** We have, now, *four* cylinder recordings, consistent in design with ones that Alexander Graham Bell was working with in Washington D.C. round about 1881.

**PHIL:** Two were discovered in the urns underneath the Paris Opera, and two had been squirreled away in archives, but they may also be from the same original source.

**NEMO:** We don't know who the two men are on the recordings, but one is named Erik and the other is called Daroghah. It seems likely that Erik invented this kind of cylinder recording, in which case, we really *do* want to know more about him.

**PHIL:** As he may also be a composer of some note. Or knew one. *Someone* connected with these recordings is responsible for a piano roll of a song we now know is "Charlotte's Song" from an opera called *Don Juan Triumphant*—

**NEMO:** --which was recorded, we think, around 1902, by Christine Daaé, a minor opera singer, on a Gramophone disc.

**PHIL:** It's also *somehow* connected with Count Philippe de Chagny, a French nobleman who disappeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**NEMO:** That is more or less what we know. And it is all-consuming. My contract on the particular digitization project I'm working on for, jointly, the BnF and the Palais Garnier will be coming to an end in a few weeks, but I have to find some way to stay in Paris, I *have* to see this thing through to the end.

**PHIL:** Intriguingly, I had an e-mail a few days ago from someone at the Library of Congress. They said someone who had been listening had gotten in touch with them, and they tipped us off to a very rare recording in their collections which had been digitized by the group OurSounds.org, and had been made public domain by them, which is great. Uh, maybe you'd better explain this part, I don't think I really understand—

**NEMO:** So what this digitized recording is of, it's not the *oldest* sound recording, but it is still a very early one. And as Phil said, it's also extremely rare, the only known one of its kind.

For some context . . . The phonautogram was invented in 1856 and basically what it did was etch sounds onto a round glass plate. That's what pre-digital sound recording did: indented or recorded sound on a surface of some material, mostly to be played back. But not this thing, this phonautograph. However, in its wake was something called the parléophon, invented by Charles Cros and described in 1877 in a piece sent to the Académie des Sciences.

**PHIL:** So it was French? Charles Cross, or rather Charles Cros, was French?

**NEMO:** Yes.

**PHIL:** It's a bit weird, because we tend to think of sound recording technology as a purely Anglophone thing—or at least, laymen like me do.

**NEMO:** Yes, you're not wrong, Edison, Tainter, most of the early people were English-speaking Americans. The thing about the parléophon was that for a long time, it was only known to have been *theoretically* conceived by Cros. There was never any evidence that he or anyone else built one or that anyone made recordings.

**PHIL:** Because it wasn't a cylinder or a disc in the sense that we know them—

**NEMO:** No, it was more like this phonautograph, it was etched onto something, so it was more like a visual record of sound. That's how Berliner started, as well. But the parléophon wasn't necessarily really intended for playback, like the phonautograph wasn't either. But both have been digitally scanned by Our Sounds, and so now we have these recordings. This parléophon recording has been esteemed since its discovery as a kind of novelty, a lot like the digitized phonautograms, but not a lot is really known about it.

**PHIL:** I would have assumed that they knew whether it was Charles Cros or somebody else recorded on it?

**NEMO:** That's a good point, but no one has really been able to establish that. It's a short recording of a person singing a piece of music that for a long time has just been unidentifiable.

**PHIL:** Hmmm . . . I think the listeners are probably wondering what this has to do with anything.

**NEMO:** Okay, yeah, so before we debut this parléophon digital scan made sonic, and before I share why I think it relates to the cylinder recordings that we've been trying to place for months now, can we backtrack a bit to another discovery you made, Phil, when you were researching *Don Juan Triumphant*?

**PHIL:** Ah yes . . . so, well, as you know, I was trying to find out whether *Don Juan Triumphant*, this opera, had ever been performed, and if it had, when and where. I couldn't find any evidence that it had ever actually been performed. And then I got a tweet . . .

**NEMO:** On Twitter? Wow, Phil, you use Twitter?

**PHIL:** Hey, you, there's no need to be so cheeky.

**NEMO:** Well, you are ancient enough to know what microfilm is.

**PHIL:** I am not ancient.

**NEMO:** Okay, no, you're not.

**PHIL:** This Tweet was from a gentleman named Michael Charles. He's a . . . now, what's the term? A collector of old recordings.

**NEMO:** His specialism was in Berliner discs and early Gramophones. So he had a lot of expert knowledge in this area.

**PHIL:** And he was going to be in Paris so did we want to arrange a meeting?

**NEMO:** And indeed, we did.

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[Actuality: hotel corridor. Parisian traffic in the distance.

Knock on door. Door opens.]

**NEMO:** Hi. Michael? We spoke over e-mail. You tweeted Phil Donan at the Shattered podcast . . .

**MICHAEL:** Hi, it's, uh, you. Somehow I thought you'd be . . .

**NEMO:** What?

**MICHAEL:** Older. Okay, come, come in.

[Nemo enters the hotel room and closes the door behind them.]

**MICHAEL:** Great. Have a seat. It's a, uh, nice hotel room, isn't it?

**NEMO:** Yeah, it's nice. You didn't happen to bring it . . .?

**MICHAEL:** Oh yeah. I brought it.

**NEMO:** Great. Very carefully . . .?

**MICHAEL:** Oh yes. Very carefully. Normally I don't travel with my discs, but I made an exception.

**NEMO:** Thank you very much. Can I see the disc?

**MICHAEL:** Sure you can.

**NEMO:** For the benefit of our listeners, I'm going to describe it.

[Gramophone disc is removed from its sleeve.]

**MICHAEL:** It's beautiful, isn't it? I sure love these early Berliner records. Only 7 inches in diameter, couldn't hold a lot but . . .

**NEMO:** Is that—is that the EMI angel . . .?

**MICHAEL:** Yeah, that's the recording angel. You see how these Berliner discs don't have labels?

**NEMO:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL:** Now, compare this with a slightly later one.

**NEMO:** The label is black.

**MICHAEL:** That's standard for instrumentalists.

**NEMO:** No red or pink or lilac . . .

**MICHAEL:** Lilac was only for Dame Nellie Melba.

**NEMO:** The diva.

**MICHAEL:** (laughs) Yeah, the diva.

**NEMO:** And Michael, what about, what about this?

**MICHAEL:** This is a 12-inch Gramophone record from 1905.

**NEMO:** It's beautiful.

**MICHAEL:** I know. Isn't it?

**NEMO:** I'll read what the label says, if you don't mind.

**MICHAEL:** Go right ahead.

**NEMO:** It's in French. It says, "Disque pour Gramophone, Marque de Fabrique, Fabriqué par La Cie . . . la Compagnie . . . The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd. et Sociétés Filiales." Then I'll explain the title in English, "from *Don Juan Triumphant*, played on Cathedral Organ."

**MICHAEL:** You see that there's no performer named.

**NEMO:** Yeah. True.

**MICHAEL:** Unusual. I've played a guessing game for awhile about who it might be. But not that many organists in France recording at that time.

**NEMO:** And then it's got a number?

**MICHAEL:** That's the catalogue number. This recording is a real rarity. Sometimes they made discs, and they might have sold 50, 60 copies.

**NEMO:** May I ask how you came to own it?

**MICHAEL:** Like many collectors, I started young. I, uh, got fascinated by an old record player that one of my relatives, I think, found in a garage sale. I got given it as a present, and when you're that age—

**NEMO:** How old were you?

**MICHAEL:** Probably about seven?

**NEMO:** Okay.

**MICHAEL:** It was a wind up Gramophone. It was easy to get a hold of discs to play on it because they were cheap and at that stage unwanted. Lots of people had them lying around their attics, so it wasn't hard to start collecting.

**NEMO:** And you specialise in opera music discs . . . or . . . ?

**MICHAEL:** You'll find that most collectors are fairly promiscuous.

**NEMO:** Right.

**MICHAEL:** (laughs) I mean, they tend to have a fairly wide range of things they're interested in. So you have some people who are just interested in the machines themselves, they're not so interested in what you can play on them.

**NEMO:** But that doesn't describe you.

**MICHAEL:** (laughs) No, not at all. I'm interested in lots of different music styles from mainly turn of the century but through the 1930s.

**NEMO:** Do you know what cathedral organ this was recorded on?

**MICHAEL:** No. It's an unusual case. There weren't supposed to be any early Gramophone records with church organs on them—the usual thing was a chamber organ or harmonium: there was even a trio recorded from Haydn's *Creation* accompanied by a harmonium . . .

**NEMO:** Okay . . .

**MICHAEL:** Joseph Haydn, father of the symphony . . . you know? This beautiful and majestic piece of music called *The Creation*. And a harmonium is . . . it's a kind of portable organ. It wheezes. (demonstrates) Like you'd have in your home. *That's* pretty eccentric, but this is the icing on the cake. I like it a lot, but I've never heard anything like it.

**NEMO:** Did the title ever strike you in any way?

**MICHAEL:** *Don Juan Triumphant?*

**NEMO:** Yeah.

**MICHAEL:** I guess what surprised me at the time was that I thought from the title, you know, the “triumphant” part, that it was going to be some kind of (sings) march type thing. But it's not like that at all. But it is VERY powerful. It's difficult to describe. And, sure, I did try to trace the opera, but I never could find much about it. It's great, and all, a real rarity like I said before, but it's part of a set. A set of overall unusual recordings. Not at all your standard run-of-the-mill recordings from this era. And so it's just one of a lot of great things I've had the good fortune to be able to collect over the years.

**NEMO:** Well, Michael, I was told that the collecting community was a very generous one, and I've certainly found that to be the case with you. Thank you so much for sharing this with us.

**MICHAEL:** You're very welcome.

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**NEMO:** So I offered to digitize that disc of Michael's, but he already had a digital version, which he'd made himself using a microphone attached to the arm of his Gramophone, which he was kind enough to share with us.

**PHIL:** Really generous of him.

**NEMO:** I know, right? We're going to make the piece of music on that Gramophone available for you to listen to very shortly—

**PHIL:** I for one can't wait to hear it.

**NEMO:** --but I just want to point out the significance of the title, which I spoke to Michael about a little . . .

**PHIL:** The Overture to *Don Juan Triumphant*. Another piece in this musical puzzle.

**NEMO:** Linking back to the recording, we think, of Christine Daaé singing “La Chanson de Charlotte.”

**PHIL:** And to the player piano transcription. Attributed in the music library to “M. Giry.” Again, not that common of a surname.

**NEMO:** So it remains to be seen, but it *is* possible that a Madame Giry, responsible for the manufacture of this Gramophone, is involved somehow. With Christine Daaé—

**PHIL:** . . . and Count Philippe de Chagny . . .

**NEMO:** . . . and Erik and Daroghah, the voices on our Volta Lab cylinders.

**PHIL:** I feel like we’re getting so close to making a big discovery here, Nemo, I really do.

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[Distorted, glitchy recording.]

**MICHAEL:** So your online handle is Nemo?

**NEMO:** (laughing embarrassedly) Yes.

[Distortion and glitch.]

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[Distorted, glitchy recording with echoes.]

**PHIL:** So you don’t drink. At all?

**NEMO:** Not really. My brother . . . Well, let’s say I know bad things can happen if one overindulges.

**PHIL:** Sensible.

**NEMO:** Now you’re making fun of me.

**PHIL:** So . . . when Alijca said you were acting strangely at the BnF office party . . .?

[Tinkling of a wine glass.]

**NEMO:** No comment.

**PHIL:** Maybe something to do with the phone calls you keep getting?

[Distortion and glitch.]

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**NEMO:** Now we really lucked out here. Michael Charles has a link with Our Sounds, so he was able to get us special permission to play the parléophon digital scan we mentioned earlier on this podcast.

**PHIL:** Really, really exciting.

**NEMO:** And so generous of him. I can't say enough good things about him and his colleagues.

**PHIL:** You know, sound recording collectors are so . . . kind-hearted, really.

**NEMO:** They seem to be.

**PHIL:** Not like academics, I can tell you.

**NEMO:** Phil has heard it already, but I haven't. So I'm quite excited.

**PHIL:** I'll just say—it may not provide more answers than questions, but—it's an experience.

**NEMO:** So here is the parléophon digital scan.

[Parléophon digital scan. Singer accompanied by piano. Recording is watery and the voice is atypical.]

**NEMO:** (in awe) Wow. . . . Wow. I don't know what that was, but it was extraordinary.

**PHIL:** It's an aria from an opera by Bellini. It's got some of the highest notes for tenor in the opera repertoire.

**NEMO:** Do you know what he's saying?

**PHIL:** Well, I think this part corresponds to the libretto, "I defy lightning, I despise fate" . . . something like that, I'd have to go back to my books on opera on all that. . .

**NEMO:** Is this Dude A? Is this Erik?

**PHIL:** (startled) You tell me. Why don't we leave you all with Michael Charles' recording from *Don Juan Triumphant*, played on cathedral organ? Remember you can get in touch with us by e-mailing [therealshatteredpodcast@gmail.com](mailto:therealshatteredpodcast@gmail.com).

[Scratchy Gramophone disc recording of Overture from *Don Juan Triumphant*, played on cathedral organ.]

**End credits:**

*The Shattered Podcast* is hosted by Nemo and Dr Phil Donan, with theme music by Katie Seaton. It is produced by Leslie McMurtry and is a Lesser of 2 Weevils production 2022.