

**London; 16 October 2018**

Our guest speaker was Aleksander Kolkowski with a programme entitled **The Stroh Violin: Horn-Assisted Strings in Early Recordings**. For those unfamiliar with this instrument, it is played like a conventional violin but has no wooden case; sound is amplified by a resonator (or soundbox) and horn attached to the body. Later models also have a smaller monitoring horn allowing the player to better hear what they are playing. Aleks began with an account of the life of Augustus Stroh, an unsung hero of late 19<sup>th</sup> century science. He invented the Stroh violin in 1899. It rapidly became associated with the recording industry because conventional violins did not record very well. The Stroh was louder and clearer. We listened to several recordings featuring Stroh violins including pieces played by Kubelik (1903) and Flesch (1905). Stroh violins were used in the first acoustic recordings of full orchestras and on some early electric recordings. In the 1920s they found a new role in jazz. Production ceased in the 1940s when aluminium became scarce and needed for the war.

Part 2 of the programme was rather exciting. In the interval Aleks had set up an Edison phonograph with blank wax cylinder and recording horn. The intention was to make a live acoustic recording to compare the sound of a Stroh with that of a conventional violin. For this purpose, Aleks introduced us to Robin Brightman, distinguished violinist formally with the London Symphony Orchestra who played part of the *méditation* from Massenet's opera *Thaïs*, first on the Stroh (an instrument he had not played before) and then on his own violin made in 1716. At the conclusion we applauded enthusiastically. Changing the recording horn for a giant brass one, Aleks then played the cylinder. To my ear, the two recordings were not radically different. Both were on the quiet side though the Stroh may have been marginally louder. But the quality of both recordings was excellent. Our concluding applause rang out clearly for Robin's playing and the continuing magic of Edison's invention.

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