

Impact Statement

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Digital Art

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Unsung Hero: Emile Berliner

Emile Berliner— a significant individual that left a lasting impact on the music industry—who was a hard worker worthy of remembrance. Because of his invention in the 1880s— gramophone and disc record—the story of music was extended beyond live performance. He was not only an inventor but also a brilliant businessman, who helped shape the future of music with his own hand by founding the United States Gramophone Company. Allowing generalization of popular music around the world. This gave music a new “shape”, turning it into something visible, touchable, and enduring.

On May 20, 185, in Germany, Emile Berliner was born into a large family of fifteen. During this time of economic growth and industrialization, Berliner had thrived to seek working opportunities. He was a printer, then a worker in a tie shop, and eventually became an assistant in the lab. These few details may seem like an ordinary summary of his early adulthood, but what I see is an encouraging role model for teenagers today. His hard-working character traits appear inspirational to the Gen-Z population. To be a successful individual, we should put our best effort to grasp every chance. Berliner worked by day and attended night classes, even before he became an official American citizen, he had been working in the inventory field to improve the quality of long-distance phone calls.

Although Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1877, Berliner’s impact should never be underestimated. In 1887, Emile Berliner patented his gramophone technology. Certainly, there were critical differences between these two inventions which made the gramophone the widespread winner. The phonograph contains a heavy wax cylinder to record music. At that time, it was difficult and slow to manufacture many copies of it. Alternatively, the gramophone invented by Berliner used a much smaller, thinner device—disc records. This brought the era of the prosperous music industry to life. In the drawing, the gramophone and disc records themselves are glowing. This surreal expression symbolized how invention has a significant impact in the history of music. Besides mass production, disc records also brought a well improved sound quality and playback time to its audience. The enhancement in the experience of sound was a further success.

In my drawing, I intend to portray Berliner's determination and spirit by using a textured brush while painting his portrait. The rough texture emphasized his strength and hard work demonstrated during his twenties, working by day to support his family and going to school at night to fulfill his vision of personal growth. Moreover, I paid extra attention when I was painting his facial expression. I purposely painted a serene, concentrated expression to showcase the peaceful atmosphere, as if we were also listening closely to the gramophone with pure amusement. The composition is set with the gramophone on the left and Berliner listening to it on the right. This setting pays homage to the logo of the RCA company—a trademark registered by Emile Berliner. Instead of the dog Nipper on the right looking confused into the gramophone, I drew Berliner on the right, closing his eyes enjoying the experience of sound brought by this gramophone. Through his expression, we can tell how valuable this experience is. The gramophone and disc records made private concerts possible in people's homes—It is an invention that endures and connects generations of music. Symbolizing this idea, I depicted many glowing spirits emerging from the light of the gramophone, they surrounded Berliner while holding hands. Because of Emile Berliner, they can now celebrate the idea that "Music is beyond a life performance".

Aside from the main figures, the background is also part of the message. The choice of a deep blue background with brilliant stars shining on it—implying the gramophone has turned music into a cultural force that crossed borders and generations. It is painted like a galaxy that brings out a visual representation that this invention connected people in different places and times just like the boundless galaxies. Surrounding the stars, the flying music sheets acted as an extension of them, marking the culmination of years of hard work of musicians now connected and preserved through the flat disc. Spending time drawing and writing on this project revealed many heroes with great contributions are not remembered in history as they deserve. Owing to this opportunity, I understood that the modern music industry that everyone can enjoy now is built on top of significant hard work of many individuals. This reflection once again reminded me how thankful I should be for being able to live in a generation where music is just a click away, where I can have easy access to all kinds of music in different eras. Meanwhile, I've also learned the importance of first-hand materials. Without all the detailed research I did because of this competition, I would never have known Berliner had such a great impact. Unfortunately, many articles about the history of the music industry give little credit to Berliner's work, and many of them barely mention him. Through my own research reading about the life story of this figure, I came to understand that it is never just Thomas Edison who gets all the credit, there's an important piece of the story that was not told to many.

I hope to extend the impact of this drawing and essay into people around me, spreading the story of Berliner to more people. I would like to create a post on social media and send work I've done to my friends, and family members. I plan to ask them to send it to more people they know and repost the post to ensure the message is widespread.