Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes
ARTEFFECT

Impact Statement

Sinan Li, Grade 11
Sharing Music with the World, 2026
Watercolor, pencil, acrylic marker on paper, 12 x 9 inches
Northern Highlands Regional High School, Allendale, New Jersey, USA
Unsung Hero: Emile Berliner

Emile Berliner was an American inventor and businessman best known for his invention of the gramophone record. As someone who has always been interested in engineering and music, his story immediately sparked my curiosity. Upon delving deeper into Berliner's life, I realized truly how widespread his impact was—and yet, his name receives little recognition today. Regardless, he continues to stand out for his innovation, altruism, and contributions to the recording industry.
Emile Berliner grew up in Hanover, Germany. His father ran a linen manufactory and his uncle washed and dyed silk and wool. Early on, Berliner would display his knack for invention and eagerness to help others—at age 16, his first invention was an improved loom. From then on, he would continue to develop his passion. When he immigrated to America to pursue his dreams, he'd work temporary jobs by day and study at the Cooper Union Institute by night. Later, impressed by his independent work on a new microphone transmitter, the Bell Telephone Company offered him a position as a research assistant. He soon progressed to becoming an independent researcher and inventor. Although Berliner's gramophone discs are his most well-known contribution, it was far from the only one. His nearly 150 patents also include a new type of resonant acoustic tiles, adopted by many halls, theaters, and churches across America. He also developed an internal combustion engine for an early helicopter, the work on which was carried on by his son.

In 1887, Emile Berliner invented the gramophone and forever changed the way we listen to music. Unlike the wax cylinders of Thomas Edison's earlier iterations, Berliner's engraved discs made it much easier to mass-produce and distribute recordings. It was initially marketed as a mere children's toy—but he knew it had the potential to be more influential and impactful. In the early 1890s, he founded the United States Gramophone Company, and the discs started being commercially manufactured. The public was delighted by this brand-new "talking machine". They kept recordings of not just songs, but speeches and sermons as well. It was a way for them to preserve the sentimental moments and music in their lives.

Berliner's impact was undeniable: the democratization of music directly began with the gramophone. Before, music was restricted to local, live performances. Recordings brought popular contemporary songs right into people's homes. For the first time, a middle-class family in Chicago, a laborer in London, and a household in Tokyo could

listen to the exact same performance by the same artist. Berliner's invention had set the stage for the birth of the recording industry. Now, artists found new audiences everywhere their records were sold, and their songs were preserved and cherished by households across the world. Thanks to this, the gramophone was one of the driving forces behind popular culture. Later, revolutionary new styles such as jazz, blues, and pop found their homes in sold-out records. Popular recordings like the 1917 "Livery Stable Blues" became instant hits, bringing jazz into mainstream demand. Without Berliner's invention, our music landscape certainly wouldn't be the same as it is today.

Emile Berliner was also dedicated to altruistic causes. In 1908, he established the Sarah Berliner Research Fellowship in honor of his mother. Every two years, it provided $1,200 to support a female scientist researching physics, chemistry, or biology. In 1909, he founded a new infirmary building at the Starmont Tuberculosis Sanitarium in Washington Grove, Maryland, dedicated to his late father. And a year before his passing, he requested to forgo an expensive funeral, wishing to direct those funds to impoverished mothers instead. His generosity solidified his legacy as one of not only a great mind, but a great man as well. This piece has been one of my first explorations with watercolor. After learning about Berliner's innovation and humanitarian sentiments, I knew that I wanted to show his passion in my artwork. At the center of the piece is a content and dignified Berliner with his most famed invention, the gramophone scattered underneath the desk are its numerous patents.

Throughout the years, he submitted dozens of these pages as he developed and refined his machine. The complex, in-depth diagrams are a testament to the amount of care put into his work. Yet, these documents provide only a brief glimpse into Berliner's years of dedication.

During my research, I found countless designs for prototypes, which he'd no doubt pored over just as closely. Meanwhile, "emitting" from the gramophone's horn is a depiction of a delighted crowd containing children and adults alike. To them, the machine in front of them was one of the latest wonders marking the turn of the century. They couldn't have known just how big an impact it would go on to make on the music industry. I imagined they were enjoying some of the popular songs of the day; maybe the records beside them contained a classical opera performance, or ragtime tunes. Or perhaps they preferred the brass band marches composed by John Philip Sousa, whose music I still listen to today.

In creating this project, I learned a lot about Emile Berliner's remarkable passion, the process of invention, and the birth and evolution of the music industry. I plan to share this project with the people around me and extend his impact. After all, my friends and family unknowingly interact with the gramophone's successors every day—from collecting vinyl records, to casual listening on a streaming service. Berliner's legacy is everywhere. His innovation and diligence brought us more than we could've ever imagined.

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