

Is a Vacuum Cleaner a Musical Instrument?

Harmonizing the Labor of Domestic Technologies in Early Twentieth-Century America

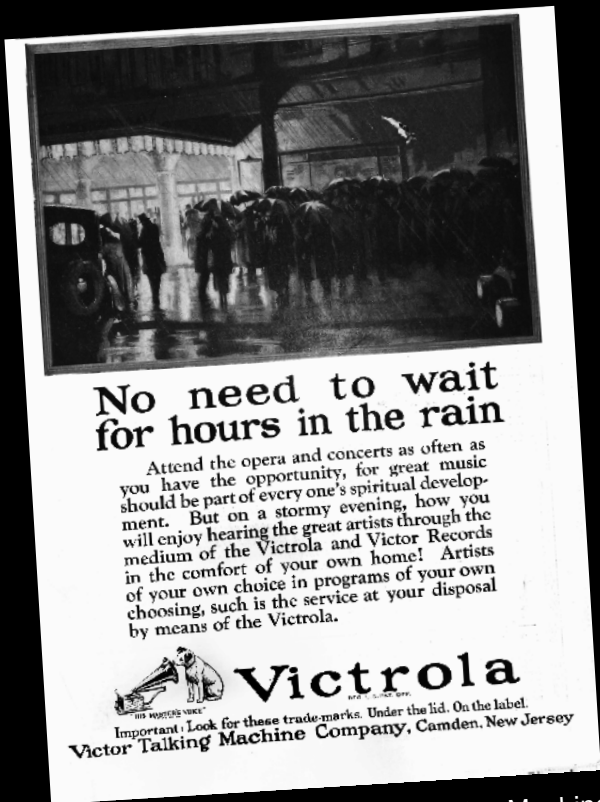


Fig. 2 Advertisement for Victor Talking Machine. Copyright holder unknown. All rights reserved



Fig. 1 Advertisement for Crosley Radio. Copyright holder unknown. All rights reserved

Clara Latham

Clara Latham traces the chronological evolution of the marketing rhetoric associated with domestic technologies, marking the significant transition of domestic labor into a sweeping commercial enterprise during the mid-twentieth century. From the rise of domestic music technologies, such as phonographs and radios in the late nineteenth century, to the broader electrification of American middle-class homes in the early twentieth century, marketing these technologies contributed to creating a widespread positive electrical consciousness within the home while creating a gendered aspect of these devices. Latham draws connections to the paradox of household appliances that were marketed to white middle-class women by promising as labor-saving and creative endeavors. Settled within the historicized relationship between technology and gender roles, Latham tells the history of the various examples of marketing electrified labor, as they shape the image of labor itself.

In Céleste Boursier-Mougenot's 2006 sound installation at Paula Cooper Gallery titled *harmonichaos*, thirteen vacuum cleaners were arranged and outfitted with a sound-frequency analyzer, harmonica, and lightbulb. As the vacuums were turned on and off, the suction of air into the harmonicas produced musical tones. According to the gallery's press release, the artist aimed to »use nature and the rhythms of everyday life to investigate the relationship between sound, space and movement.«¹ The work challenges listeners to reconsider the boundary between noise and music by rendering a banal domestic appliance as an avant-garde musical instrument. The sonic manifestation of these hybrid instruments, an unwieldy drone modulated by random changes in the intensity of the air flow, highlights their functional incompatibility: the vacuums fail to clean, the harmonicas fail to sing. We might, however, ask how a vacuum cleaner came to occupy such a distant conceptual space from a harmonica in the first place, such that Boursier-Mougenot's signifying combination elicits artistic provocation.

When we look at vacuum cleaners alongside other commercial appliances that were marketed to middle-class homes in the same historical period, we find a shared commitment to reducing domestic labor through technological innovation. Novel devices of the home such as vacuum cleaners, radios, phonographs, player pianos, washing machines, and electric lamps were marketed to middle-class American homes during the twentieth century's first decades, a period of rapid industrial growth. The marketing rhetoric surrounding the commercialization of household appliances was also applied to domestic musical devices, consistently claiming that such technologies performed labor for the consumer, capable of carrying out tasks or work on the consumer's behalf.

For example, an 1896 advertisement for the National Gramophone Company claimed that »It's expensive to hire an orchestra to come to your home and play for you, or a famous singer to sing for you, but if you buy a GRAMOPHONE you can buy a »Record« of that orchestra's playing or that singer's singing for fifty cents,« as though the gramophone rendered one's journey to and from Carnegie Hall² for a fraction of the cost, not to mention the time. The advertisement for the Crosley Radio shown in Figure 1 paints a picture of a lonely, housebound »dear old mother« whose life will be brightened by »the immediate response to the turn of the dials; the clearness of reception from far distant points.« The ad promises efficiency, that the radio will work on behalf of the consumer by amusing her in the comfort of her home.

Similarly, the Victrola ad shown in Figure 2 shows a group of people waiting in the rain, capturing the sense that accompanies the movement to and from musical events. The ad states, »On a stormy evening, how you will enjoy hearing the great artists through the medium of the Victrola and Victor Records in the comfort of your own home!« implying that the phonograph can save the consumer a trip out into the rain by bringing the orchestra directly to the home.

Certain advertisements for household music technologies aimed toward the white middle-class woman consumer promised that these products would save her the labor of traveling to live musical concerts in the same way washing machines meant she wouldn't have to scrub clothes by hand, and electric lightbulbs meant she didn't have to light the house with gas lamps. We find similar rhetoric in the ad shown in Figure 3 as those in Figures 1 and 2. The Air-Way Electric Cleaner is described as a »quick and easy way to free yourself from the burden of housecleaning,« just as the Victrola will save you the burdensome journey to the concert hall.

The player piano and phonograph afforded housewives the convenience of playing famous musical works for their children, and popular classics for their guests, without practicing the piano, just as the example with the electric washing machine saved the time and effort of doing domestic work by hand. This promise implicitly reveals the labor required for domestic music making, which, like other forms of domestic labor, has been historically rendered invisible within a capitalistic system that has historically valued productive labor over reproductive and artistic/creative labor.

The commercial music industry that came to define the twentieth century grew exponentially between 1900 to 1930, and the phonograph and radio were central to its rise. While the phonograph was a well-established feature of a middle-class home by the time radio appeared in the 1920s, and by 1930, 40.3 percent of all US households owned a radio.³ As a result, the widespread adoption of phonographs and radios profoundly changed domestic life, these technologies were only part of the ubiquitous electrification of the American middle-class home in the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1910, only one in ten American homes had electricity; most urban homes were wired by the end of the 1920s.⁴ The advertising of phonographs and radios was part and parcel of vigorous campaigns selling all kinds of new household appliances throughout this rise of American electrification. Beginning in 1920, General Electric's »advertising introduced a new objective: the

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The Air-Way Electric Cleaner



Use It Either Way

The Air-Way Is So Light That a Child Can Carry and Operate It

On rugs, carpets and floor and other easy places operate the Air-Way just like any cleaner.

But when you come to the hard places—corners, under nooks and out of the ordinary cleaning like picture walls, window frames, moldings, pictures, mattresses, and tufted furniture—just pick up your Air-Way and use the handle as shown in the picture.

Cleans the Places Only a Dust Cloth Can Reach

With the Air-Way handle you easily clean the places that only a dust cloth can reach. No waiting to put on cumbersome attachments—not a bit of bother—you simply turn the indicator arms toward the handle and in a few minutes the Air-Way has cleaned the house for you.

The Air-Way is the quick, easy way to free yourself from the burden of housecleaning—a different way from any other you have ever seen demonstrated.

Visit the Air-Way dealer today and let him show you the latest cleaning marvel that science has brought to you.

If you cannot find the local Air-Way dealer write for names and addresses to:

THE AIR-WAY COMPANY, TOLEDO, OHIO

DEALERS: Air-Way Electric Cleaners are appearing under a blue check mark in the following business directories: White or when blank refer to page.

Exclusive Distributors for Greater New York: Air-Way Vacuum Cleaner Company, 25 Park Avenue, First Floor, American Vacuum Engineering Co., Inc., 41 West 42nd Street, N. Y. City, N. Y.

Chicago, Ill.: Vacuum Cleaner Co., 117 N. La Salle Street, Chicago, Ill.



Fig. 3 Advertisement for Air-Way Electric Cleaner. Copyright holder unknown. All rights reserved

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She washes most of the morning ...then dances half the night

What she does, thousands of other women are doing today. Women no younger or stronger than you.



Once she would have taken to her bed. Now a big morning's wash leaves her only fresh, ready to dance, to play bridge, to see a show that some evening.

What is her secret? How does she do it? The answer is simple. She does nothing that you can't do. The change that came over her life can easily be made in yours. The thing that washes the miracle is a new kind of washing machine, called the new Easy Washer.

Easy Washers have long been famous for the gentle way they trim out expensively dyed dyes. That wonderful new-type Easy still dyes that. But it also does much more. It does what you not only the rubbing, but also all the other heavy tasks, such as wringing the clothes and emptying pails of water.

It cleans up the messy lesser soap-suds you—those little inconspicuous stains that waste their time and temper—the broken buttons, the heating of extra wash water, the staining out of deep-seated wrinkles.

No wringing to do

Just raise a little lever and inside of three minutes the full batch of clothes in the new Easy is dry enough to hang out. Each piece is left evenly damp, with so little water in

the fabric that clothes hung indoors will not drip. While one batch of clothes is being dried another batch is washing, so that you always have at once and size it out in half.

No pails of water to empty

You'll think the Easy's new method of wringing all the water is even more wonderful than this is true. Syracuse Washing Machine Corporation, Syracuse, N. Y.

and sympathize with the troubles and burdens which they passed on to us and which this washer relieves. Try the new Easy once in your own home and see for yourself that this is true. Syracuse Washing Machine Corporation, Syracuse, N. Y.

EASY WASHER

QUICK READING FACTS

Washing to do—When it is time to wash, the Easy Washer and wringer do the work for you. The wringer is so simple that even a child can get just the right amount of soap suds on the clothes. The wringer also wrings out all the water, so that the clothes are ready to hang. The wringer is so simple that even a child can get just the right amount of soap suds on the clothes. The wringer also wrings out all the water, so that the clothes are ready to hang.

Fig. 4 Advertisement for Easy Washer Ladies' Home Journal, 1928. Copyright ProQuest IC 2015. All rights reserved

These Hands to Play for You

Above is the reproduction of the hands of the great Piano artist.

These hands earned in the aggregate millions of dollars.

They charmed hundreds of thousands of people by their matchless wizardry at the Piano—their astounding mastery of almost impossible difficulties of technique.

Yet they charmed but few times—not many of us can carry a golden recollection of their playing—some of us heard them not at all.

Wouldn't you like to sit down tonight after the stress of a strenuous day, just when you want relaxation—when you want to be mentally revived and refreshed—and listen to the velvety purring elegance of Leschitzky—the thundering majesty of Liszt—the fire of Carreno—the passionate romanticism of Rubenstein?

Wouldn't you like to create these sounds for yourself—easily—with little or no mental or physical effort?

You, Mr. Business Man—you, Mr. Merchant—Wouldn't you like to have your little child play the things these artists play or some dear old song or hymn?

You can have them all at your command by means of a Cecilian Player Piano—all as plays the entire keyboard of 88 notes, not merely 65 as does the ordinary player piano.

You, your wife, daughter, or child can easily play the Cecilian—no matter how indifferent they're written, for the Cecilian is the freest from useless "gimmicks"—unnecessary devices—confusing levers—of any player piano manufactured.

And at the same time the Cecilian is the surest, most durable and most easily controlled player piano made, for the reason that its interior mechanism is in metal, not wood—unaffected by heat or cold, moisture or dryness.

Let us send you our (free) Art Brochure.

We have a most interesting booklet on Player Pianos, giving you advice as to the selection of the right Player Piano and why. Care and advice on a Cecilian and enable you to get the best value for your money. For say on 1—Send me Art Brochure B.

CECILIAN PLAYER PIANOS

THE FARRAND COMPANY, DETROIT, MICH.




Fig. 5 Advertisement for Cecilian Player Piano. Copyright holder unknown. All rights reserved

creation and fostering throughout America of a positive electrical consciousness which would normally express itself in a certain fundamental ›want‹ – the desire of individual families to make their homes into electrified dwelling places.«⁵ Shortly after – between 1922 and 1930 – the annual advertising budget for General Electric increased from two million to twelve million dollars.⁶

These campaigns centered on rhetoric promoting a scientifically efficient home through electricity. Under the direction of Bruce Barton, General Electric campaigns such as »Make your House a Home« presented domestic labor-saving devices as essential for the housewife to excel in her role. Electrical manufacturing giants General Electric and Westinghouse asserted that electric machines could take on the burden of housework, and we see this idea echoed across popular women's magazines of the era. As historian Roland Marchand argues in *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940*, advertisements from this period sought to appeal to consumer fantasies of modern life, and the largest role in the advertising tableaux was a fantasy of the modern housewife.⁷ According to an ad that appeared in fifteen magazines between April and July 1925 including *Saturday Evening Post*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Literary Digest*, »This is the test of a successful mother – she puts first things first. She does not give to sweeping the time that belongs to her children.«⁸ Coinciding with the scientific homemaking movement, the modern American housewife trope frequently appears in advertisements as the family's general purchasing agent or G.P.A.⁹ The transformation of the American middle-class home into an electrified bungalow awash in domestic appliances cultivated a new figure of the middle-class housewife as the manager of the home.¹⁰

The belief that domestic technologies would produce labor for the housewife involved a magical transformation of reproductive labor into productive labor.¹¹ While the housewife's domestic work of cleaning and preparing food did not generate wages, devices that promised to perform this labor in her place rendered that labor productive. Ironically, the marketing rhetoric selling these technologies depended on the idea that unwaged labor was valuable. Historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan was one of the first to point out the irony that nineteenth and early twentieth-century domestic technologies falsely appeared to produce labor for the imaginary American housewife. In Schwartz Cowan's book *More Work for Mother: Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, she argued that the process of industrialization unfolded differently in the domestic

sphere than in the realm of the market.¹² While convention tells us that industrialization transformed the American household by turning it from a unit of production to a unit of consumption, Schwartz Cowan stated that some technological systems moved production out of the home and into factories, but others did not, arguing that while labor-saving devices reorganized the processes of housework, they did not save the labor of the average housewife.¹³

Like housework, musical labor is hard to define precisely because it often takes place outside of the market; instead it functions as social reproduction.¹⁴ As Marxist feminist Leopoldina Fortunati pointed out in her 1981 book *L'arcano della riproduzione: Casalinghe, prostitute, operai e capitale*, domestic labor presents a quagmire for traditional Marxian analysis because it is both a necessary condition for the production of capital, yet occurs outside of the market.¹⁵ The repetitive claim in the marketing of phonographs, radios, autoharps, player pianos, and theremins in the first decades of the twentieth century is that these technologies save labor and inadvertently reveals that domestic work is labor, despite the fact that it does not generate wages.

Furthermore, there is a paradox in the connection made here between domestic music technologies and domestic technologies that are not musical. In Figure 4, the Easy Washer is sold as a device that will grant the housewife time for leisure activities, claiming she is »ready to dance, to play bridge, or to see a show that same evening.« Similarly, in Figure 5, the player piano is presented with the claim that the housewife can »create the sounds of Liszt or Rubenstein, with little or no mental effort.« Musical practice is sometimes included in household drudgery, while at other times it exemplifies leisure activities that are by definition the opposite of labor. This paradoxical understanding of musical labor resonates in sound works like *harmonichaos*, which call upon utilitarian devices to act as musical instruments. Indeed, perhaps Boursier-Mougenot's 2006 installation not only compels us to hear resonances between a household appliance and a musical instrument, but also suggests an equivalence between domestic work and creative work.

Clara Latham's research and creative practice focus on the relationship between sound, technology, sexuality, and the body. She has published articles in *Sound Studies*, *Women & Music*, *Contemporary Modern European History*, the *Opera Quarterly*, and the edited volume *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*.

1 Press release available online at <https://www.paulacoopergallery.com/artists/celeste-boursier-mougenot#tab:thumbnails> (accessed January 27, 2024).

2 *Cosmopolitan* 21 (June 1896).

3 Steve Craig: »How America Adopted Radio: Demographic Differences in Set Ownership Reported in the 1930–1950 U.S. Censuses,« in: *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* (June 2004), pp. 179–95, p. 182.

4 David E. Nye: *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880–1940*. Cambridge, MA 1991, p. 239.

5 »The Home Electrical at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition,« *General Electric Review* 18 no. 6 (June 1915). John Hammond, General Electric Publicity Department: »The Psychology of a Nation's Wants.« Typescript,

Hammond Papers, L 5145. Cited in *Electrifying America*, p. 265.

6 *Electrifying America*, p. 268.

7 Roland Marchand: *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985, p. 168.

8 *Electrifying America*, pp. 271–72.

9 Marchand: p. 168; Robert Sklar, ed. *The Plastic Age: 1917–1930*. New York 1970, pp. 94–95.

10 Alice Kessler-Harris: *Women Have Always Worked: A Concise History*. Urbana 2018, pp. 43–45.

11 Nancy Fraser characterizes this magical transformation as cannibalism. See Nancy Fraser: *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do About It*. London, 2023, pp.

17–23.

12 See Ruth Schwartz Cowan: *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*. New York 1985.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 44–45.

14 For work on music as social reproduction, see Eric Drott: »Music and the Work of Social Reproduction,« *Cultural Politics* 15 (2019), pp. 162–83; Marie Thompson: »Sounding the Arcane: Contemporary Music, Gender and Reproduction,« *Contemporary Music Review* 39 (2020), pp. 273–92.

15 Leopoldina Fortunati: *L'Arcano della Riproduzione: Casalinghe, prostitute, operai e capitale* (1981) (*The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, 1995).