

Harvard Vocarium (1933-1956)

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Essay by Matthew Rubery (guest post)*



Frederick C. Packard, Jr.



Original label



T.S. Eliot

Donald Hall listened to poetry once or twice week after enrolling at Harvard University in 1947. Writers he heard on 78 rpm records included W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, Archibald MacLeish, Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, Stephen Spender, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams. Hall, who went on to become Poet Laureate, recalled of his student days, “we read poetry with our ears.” Their voices reached Hall and countless others through the Harvard Vocarium.

The man who started the Harvard Vocarium was Frederick Clifton Packard, Jr. Packard had taught at Harvard as an Associate Professor of Public Speaking since 1920. In addition to sponsoring recitation competitions among students, Packard co-authored several textbooks and edited a collection titled “Great Americans Speak: Short Speeches that Have Shaped Our Destiny.” He spent a year on the New York stage and moved in a milieu where poetry recitation was the norm. His wife frequently read poems on the radio. As Packard’s granddaughter recalled, it was not uncommon for one of them to break spontaneously into recitation after dinner.

Packard had the idea to start the Vocarium in 1930. The first poet recorded for the series was T.S. Eliot. In July 1933, Harvard’s alumni bulletin announced a series of records made by Harvard faculty including renowned English instructor Charles Townsend Copeland (“Copey”). The 12” 78 rpm records were sold for \$1.50 each. Discs were made of shellac and later vinyl when shellac became scarce during the Second World War. By 1955, all discs were vinyl 33 1/3 rpm albums and sold for \$2.65. Packard advertised them in the “New Yorker” and the “New York Times.”

“Vocarium” is a word coined by Packard to mean “a collection of voice recordings for use as a study aid in the appreciation of literature.” The term referred both to the record label and to the physical space in which the recordings were held. Packard’s frustration with the dearth of poetry recordings had driven him to make his own. Today, recorded verse is widely available through libraries and online, but in the 1930s there were only scattered recordings made on wax cylinders and discs that could be difficult to locate. No label focused exclusively on the spoken word.

Packard's initiative set a precedent for subsequent series initiated by Caedmon, Columbia, Stanford, Yale, the Library of Congress, and the National Council of Teachers of English.

The collection grew steadily from 1933 onward. By mid-century, its inventory included more than 70 discs of poetry. Performances display a range of speaking styles, from mannered elocution to mumbles and mutters. Some recordings present the poems in a new light. Ezra Pound reads "Sestina: Altaforte," for example, while shrieking and beating on a kettle-drum. (According to the Woodberry Poetry Room's former curator, Pound restricted access to the poem in order to prevent Harvard students from committing acts of war.) There were 12 discs of English verse from Chaucer to Yeats, 20 discs of Latin poetry and prose, and lectures by Harvard's faculty. The collection also included Bible readings, madrigals, ballads, and folk songs. Great care was given to casting speakers. One album of English verse was read by Robert Speaight, for example, a Shakespearean actor best known for his role in T.S. Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral." In total, there were over 500 literary discs available for student use.

Harvard's Lamont Library became home to the Vocarium after heavy use of the equipment confirmed the need for a dedicated space. Lamont's Woodberry Poetry Room included four "listening posts" consisting of turntables, headphones, and speakers. There were an average of 50 headphone users per day after the Library opened in 1949. The records were seen as aids to learning and appreciation. Instructors regularly taught courses there, and on summer afternoons students enjoyed poetry and music concerts.

The Vocarium's guiding principle was that literature, no matter what genre, spoken or written, should be available in a single location for education and enjoyment. Packard advised students both to read and to listen to literature for the richest aesthetic experience. The Vocarium was established "so that book and disc could be savored together."

Packard's ideas about the oral interpretation of literature were widely shared among Speech and Drama departments at universities across the United States. Throughout his career, Packard insisted that literature, and poetry in particular, should be read aloud. As he once wrote, "I hold the opinion that literature attains its full embodiment only when one is receiving it by ear." Skilled speakers and listeners with trained ears were crucial to literature's reception.

In Packard's view, people seldom listened to poetry because there were few opportunities to hear it done well. Poets were often terrible readers of their own work. Packard insisted that skillful reading aloud was necessary to the development of literary taste and appreciation. At last, after centuries of silent reading, the use of sound-recording equipment such as the phonograph offered him a chance to "return 'voiced' literature to its former glory."

Harvard College Library withdrew its support for the Harvard Vocarium label in August 1955. Although Packard continued to run the label for a short time by himself, its output was greatly diminished from previous years.

Packard recorded the twentieth century's great writers for the enjoyment of his contemporaries but also for posterity. He regarded them as snapshots of the way Americans spoke. Harvard confirmed their historic value. When Vocarium records were first released in 1933, Harvard

College Library announced that it would preserve the master records since “It seems certain that they will become increasingly valuable as historical documents of our spoken language.”

The Vocarium has long been silent, but its legacy of recorded poetry continues to this day. The Woodberry Poetry Room’s collection of poetry recordings has grown into one of the country’s most comprehensive archives. In Harvard’s wake, other universities began similar poetry series. There are now numerous online repositories featuring contemporary poets reading their work. And we can still hear T.S. Eliot reading “Gerontion” and “The Hollow Men” from all those years ago.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.
(Packard photograph courtesy of the Woodberry Poetry Room, Harvard University)