

Condon — the classic collector

By JOHN STAPLETON

The ghostly fingers of Rachmaninov, Ravel, Richard Strauss and Stravinsky tickle the ivories in Newtown every night.

They play to an audience of one ... but not for long.

Dennis Condon loves to sit in his living room and listen to Percy Grainger play Grieg, the Frenchmen Ravel and Debussy, Prokofiev playing excerpts from his operas, or Gustav Mahler performing shortly before his death in 1911. They are playing music exactly as they did while still alive.

Dennis is one of the world's foremost collectors of "reproducing" pianos and piano rolls, an obsession which began 42 years ago while he was a music student.

Reproducing pianos differ from pianolas in giving an almost perfect reproduction of the performance, including volume and dynamics.

The technology of the early disc recordings never fully captured the dynamic range of the piano. By using the rolls on reconditioned reproducing pianos a far closer version of the original performance can be gained.

Tonight a new series of compact discs, known as the Condon Collection and recorded from Dennis's mountain of original piano rolls, will be launched on the new SBS music label. Included are Igor Stravinsky playing the *Fire Bird Ballet*, Vladimir Horowitz playing his own work and George Gershwin performing *Rhapsody in Blue* in the year it was composed, 1924.

There will be more to come. Dennis has more than 8,000 rolls and 10 reproducing pianos.

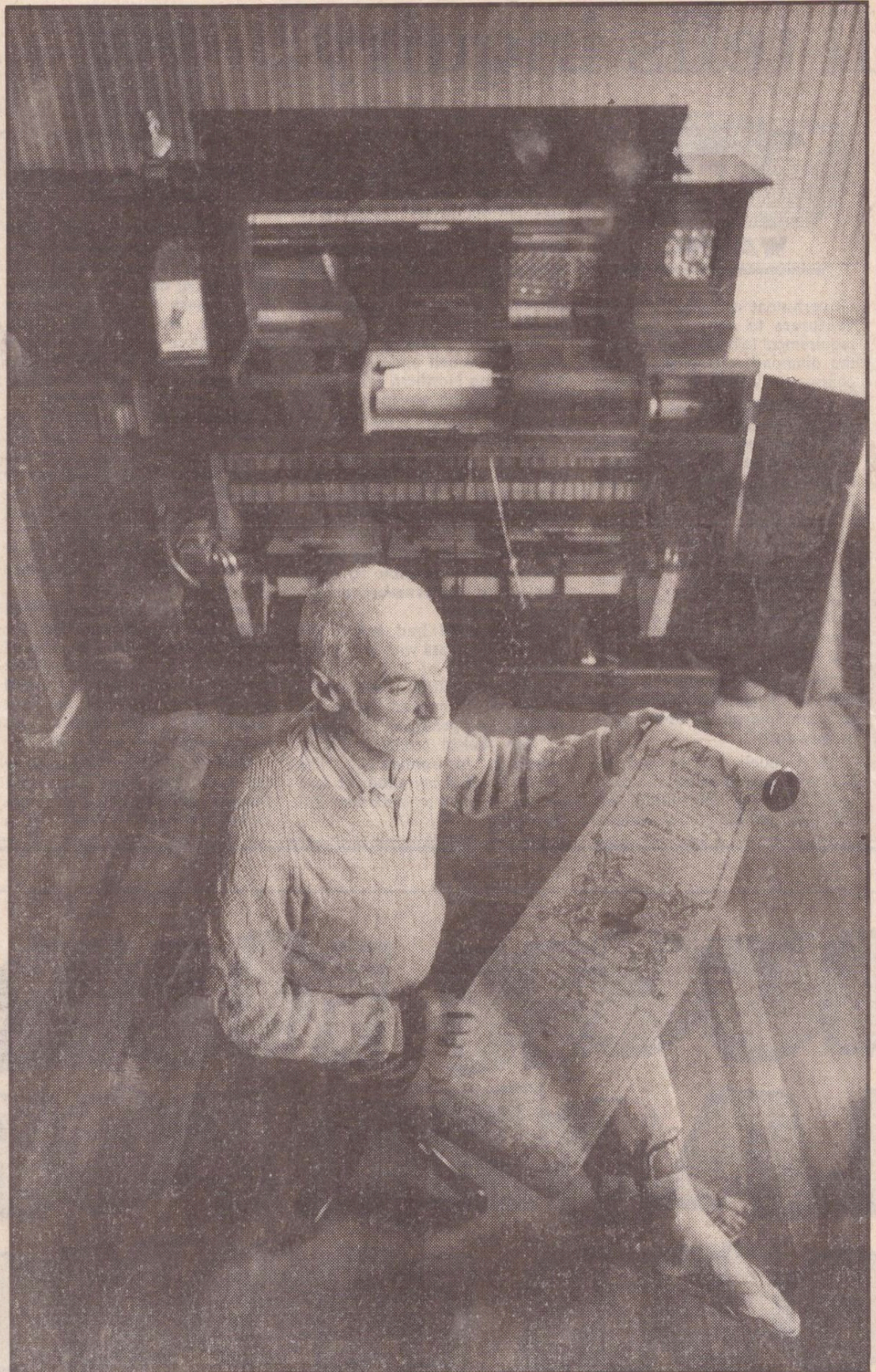
For Dennis the release of the series is the pinnacle of a lifetime's work. He bought his house because it had rooms large enough to accommodate his collection.

Formerly a teacher in musical education, he took early retirement so he could concentrate on collecting and he has travelled the world chasing rare rolls.

"It is a mission for me, to make the best of these machines, and to disseminate all the performances that are buried in the paper rolls. There are some quite extraordinary and quite rare performances in them," Dennis said.

"For me music is a spiritual experience. I like to think that when the machine is playing it sounds much as if the pianist was sitting there."

Mr Jim Stewart, a director of the Dolphin Music Group, has been the primary force in getting the music released. He said: "When I first heard them the hair stood up on the back of my arms. It was like walking over someone's grave. The ghost of that pianist is actually delivering a performance."



Pianoman Dennis Condon with a roll of Richard Wagner.

Picture by STEVE CHRISTO