

## PART I



# DEAD pianists SOCIETY

*Duncan Peppercorn introduces a multi-part 'festival of the finger' sharing his passion of pianists from the past.*

**I** can't now recall exactly what Toscanini said...

...because at the tender age of seven I stepped backwards and onto the copy of the fourth HMV Christmas Greetings record that I had failed to find an appropriate pile for in my attempts to catalogue my Grandmother's dusty collection of 78s. Everything else fitted into one or other category (probably arranged by vocal/ orchestral/ other, or some such), and had been put into a pile, but this one maverick was still on the carpet, homeless. I cried for ages, but Grannie took one look at it, told me about my Dad's attempts to halve a record and stick it back together again after reversing one half – and how he had failed – and chucked it in the bin. It had Toscanini's festive greetings on one side, I recall, and some music on the other.

Which is all by way of an excuse for the fact that I'm going to write about the records that were made by pianists, all now dead, in the first half of this century, and even earlier. You see, I had no choice: I was already obsessed with shellac at the age of seven. I didn't do this on purpose, despite what my wife thinks.

At least part of the appeal of old recordings lies in their historical fascination. This is akin to the buzz that we get from seeing primitive moving images of Queen Victoria's funeral, or still photos of the carnage of the Crimean War. But for me, to listen in to four minutes of passing time from 90 years ago is the most vivid and moving experience. Caruso letting rip at the recording horn for the first time in his hotel room in Milan in 1902 (I imagine the carriages passing outside the window, and can feel the hangers-on in the room with him); Landowska playing on as she recorded Scarlatti sonatas in Paris as German bombs fell; Paderewski trying to coax a worthwhile sound from the piano at his villa in

Morges; Adelina Patti in her castle after insisting that Mr Gaisberg bring his apparatus to Wales to record her... you can still still listen to all of these. And there is the excitement of hearing a lost approach to interpretation, of hearing interpreters whose lives overlapped with the greatest of composers. At least one pianist who recorded (Saint-Saëns) was born within ten years of Beethoven's death.

There is also the simple magic of interpretations that were lived in and lived with over long careers by artists who had little of the modern pressure to be catholic in their taste and comprehensive in their repertoire. I repeatedly return to ancient recordings to discover the magic that is frequently in short supply in modern interpretations, and sometimes entirely absent. I also find it much easier to go to sleep to the slightly constricted sound of pre-tape,

pre-digital, pre-hi-fi recordings, but I suppose that is merely a personal oddity.

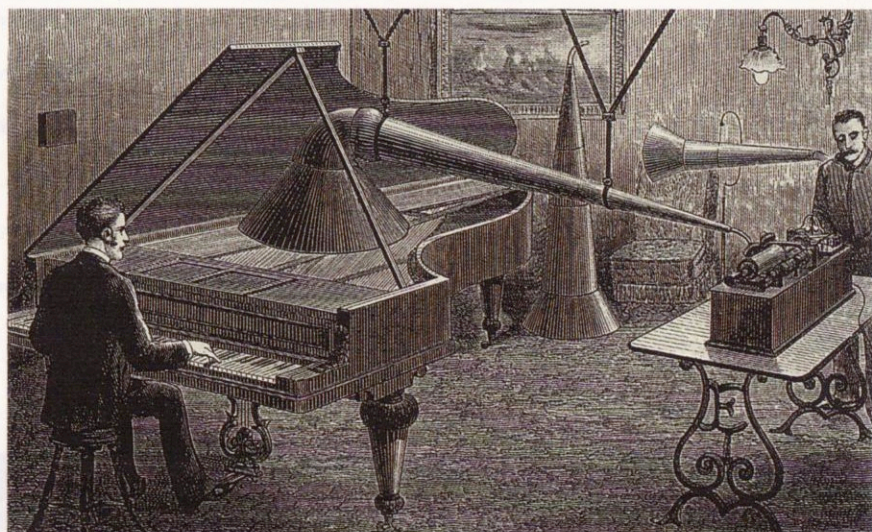
At some point I discovered that I loved piano music, and soon after read Harold Schonberg's book *The Great Pianists*. I wanted to try to hear what these passed [*sic*] masters sounded like, and so I developed my interest in what I find myself describing as 'Dead Pianists' to my friends. It is a correct description, although I should perhaps add 'recorded' for full accuracy. The purpose of this series is to share some of my interest ('obsession' to my nearest and dearest) with you.

## ALL OLD RECORDS ARE FAR FROM EQUAL

Up until 1925 all recordings were made without the benefit of microphones and electronics. The artist or artists played or sang in the direction of a horn, which channelled the sound directly to a diaphragm which vibrated a cutter progressing across a wax surface. Electricity didn't come into the process. Such recordings are, reasonably, referred to as 'acoustic' and have, generally, a far more restricted dynamic and frequency range than the subsequent 'electric' recordings that followed the introduction of the microphone and an electronic process. Acoustic recordings were initially made on rotating cylinders (a methodology invented by Edison) and subsequently on rotating discs (which had the advantage that they could be copied by making a flat 'negative' of the disc and using it as a stamp), a technique invented by Emile Berliner in 1889.

Although Edison recognised the possibility that his machine could be used to capture music (he apparently made recordings of Hans von Bülow, born in 1830, playing the piano and conducting the *Eroica* symphony, though these are lost; and recordings were made from the prompters' box of the Metropolitan Opera, which survive), the results were at best poor and at worst unrecognisable and it was not until Berliner's assistant, Fred Gaisberg,

**Classical piano recording; with modern knowledge, we now know that this design of horn would have reflected more sound than it captured.**







Wanda Landowska playing for the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy at his home in 1909.

came to London in 1900 with a vision to record music using the much more robust and quiet flat discs that things began to move. Gaisberg is the first great hero of recorded music: it was he who recorded Caruso in 1902, and it was he who instituted the majority of the initiatives that made HMV the greatest record company up to the Second World War.

Gaisberg recognised that using the acoustic process some instruments recorded better than others, and that some voices were eminently 'phono-genic', most specifically Caruso's. Caruso never recorded electrically, yet his acoustic discs are so rich and full that one does not feel robbed. Unfortunately, the piano didn't record too well, or at least it didn't seem to when recordings were played back on the primitive reproducers of the time. As a result we must assume that pianists who might otherwise have recorded (and who in some cases did record piano rolls – Gustav Mahler, for example), or have recorded more, were discouraged. Today we can extract far more from the shellac grooves, and whilst there is a strong argument that today we have still to succeed in making fully convincing piano recordings, at least we can make these early attempts sound like a piano, rather than a strangled guitar (which is how they have been described in the past).

### PIANO ROLLS AND THE PLAYER PIANO

One of the perennial discussions about recordings of pianists, most recently aired in the first issue of the *International Classical Record Collector* magazine (ICRC), centres around the validity or otherwise of piano roll recordings. Between 1904 and the advent of electrical recording (and universal wireless use) in the mid-1920s a number of companies developed mechanisms that would enable a piano to play back recordings from a paper roll. Unlike the pianola, on which the operator has full control over tempi and dynamics, and with which there was no control over



A Berliner 'Gramophone'. An example of the machine as marketed between 1889 & 1893.

how the notes are hit, these reproducing pianos endeavoured to capture details of exactly how the piece was played: tonal shading by the use of subtle pedal techniques and exactly how hard the notes were hit. Three companies stand out: Welte, Duo-art and Ampico. At the time the reproduction of rolls was considered by many pianists to be the ultimate in recording. It also had the advantage over the primitive wax process that the rolls could be edited later to take out mistakes.

Many of these rolls have now been transferred to CD, including a magnificent selection from the collection of Dennis Condon in Australia. My own view is that at its best the reproducing piano can give a remarkably accurate picture of how the pianist sounded, specifically if played back at the correct tempo on a very well maintained machine. The Duo-art and Ampico, which are more advanced than the earlier Welte machines, are particularly fine. The best results can be heard when the artist took a hands-on approach, as the technically-minded Josef Hofmann did. His roll of the first movement of the *Moonlight* sonata is almost identical to his Columbia (acoustic) recording. He clearly took the opportunity, however, to allow science to come to the aid of art in his roll of the final movement, which is

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supernaturally fast and rhythmically perfect! Other pianists took the making of rolls less seriously, but before we dismiss the rhythmically-spastic Arthur Friedheim rolls we should listen to his discs – which show identical faults.

In summary, I am increasingly drawn to player piano recordings, and in some cases they present unique opportunities (to hear Mahler, or the great pedagogue Leschetitsky). This article will, however, be about discs.

### AVAILABILITY OF RECORDINGS

Almost every recording discussed in these articles is currently available on CD. Unfortunately, the majority of the companies making these recordings are not distributed in Australia. Pearl and Opal (which are different labels of the same company) can be found; APR, VAIA, Dante, Biddulph, Symposium and Music & Arts are, if intermittently; where recordings are on EMI, RCA or one of the other 'major' labels they should be easy to order. ♦

*The next issue's instalment of 'Dead Pianists' Society' looks at Josef Hofmann's first recordings, an alleged Tchaikovsky cylinder, and Albeniz, Brahms, Debussy and Saint-Saëns playing their own works.*