

Dusty rolls of music history

By BERNADETTE CRUISE

WHILE in Sydney, a small party of friends suggested that I should visit Denis Condon and listen to his historic collection of piano rolls.

In the convoluted streets of Newtown stood a formidable stone building, Ampico Towers. Once the iron grille barring the entrance had opened, we entered a fascinating home (built in 1885) containing over 8000 piano rolls and numerous mechanical pianos.

The wizard of this home is Denis Condon, compiler of *The Condon Collection* which comprises some of the finest recordings made by great musicians early this century.

Ravel, Gershwin and Stravinsky are just a few of the composers who have been invited to record their own music for Ampico, Duo-Art and Welte Mignon reproducing pianos between 1904 and 1935.

It has taken Denis 40 years to amass this collection, partly through his own initiative and partly through contacts in the Automatic Musical Instruments Collectors Association — an association based in the United States, boasting 2000 members. When tipped off, Denis acts quickly, locating precious materials from locations as far flung as Wales.

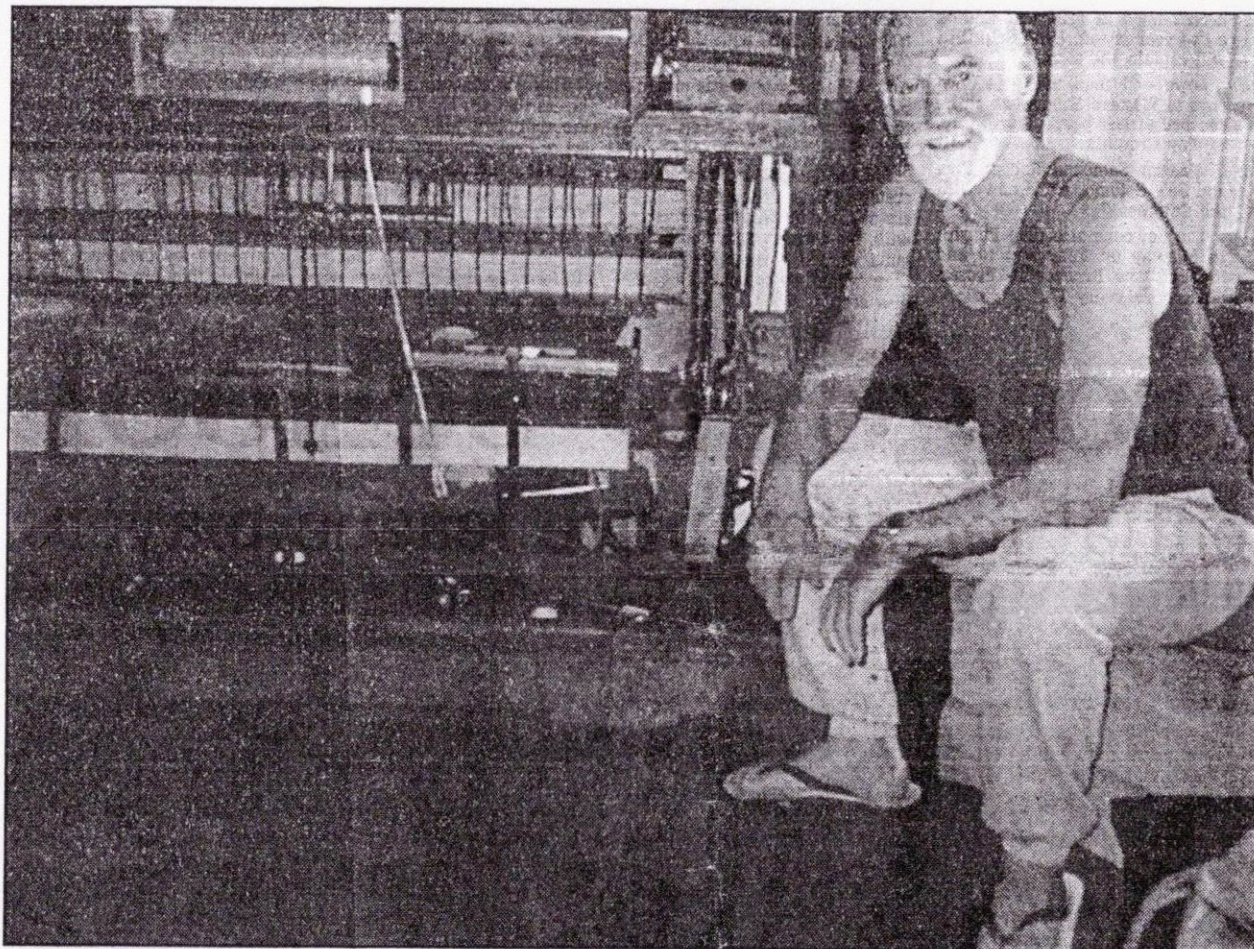
The first successful reproducing piano was the Welte Mignon, marketed as early as 1904. Then came Ampico in 1911, Duo-Art in 1914 and in 1919 Hupfeld's Triphonola.

As we thumbed through the encyclopedia on reproducing pianos, strange names jumped off the page: Duophonola, Triphonola, graduating to Nickel Grabbers, Pianotainer and, for fiddlers, the violono.

Dennis demonstrated the reproducing pianos in his collection and we had to admit that the individuality of each performer had been retained, whether we were listening to Granados, Rachmaninov, Dohnanyi or merely *Kitten on the Keys*.

In practice, the reproducing piano was a highly sophisticated device installed in grand and upright instruments by major piano manufacturers.

Special paper rolls were used, coded to operate the sustaining and soft pedals of the piano as



Denis Condon and the intricate internal workings of one of his reproducing pianos.

well as the striking force of individual keys. The rolls, and an ingenious system of pneumatics, enabled the device to reproduce on its host piano a perfect rendition of the artist playing.

Steinway, Bechstein and Bosendorfer included the invention in their famous pianos while Ampico, Duo-Art and Welte Mignon competed to place under contract musicians such as Richard Strauss, Rubinstein and Percy Grainger.

An amusing result was the introduction of Comparison Concerts where the reproducing piano was heard in recital jointly with the living artist.

Critical reactions from the press were requested.

The Los Angeles Times reported of a 1920s concert: "Impossible to tell when Ornstein was playing with his own hands and when by means of a reproducing piano."

The comments of composer-pianists on hearing their playback is

testimony to the quality of the sound.

"It is impossible to attain a greater perfection of reproduction. I am astonished," Debussy said in 1913. In 1906 Dohnanyi said, "My recordings are true portraits of my playing."

A year earlier Artur Schnabel said, "All the personality of the artist's interpretation is most faithfully rendered."

What was the catalyst that started Denis on this extraordi-

nary career? "I was brought up with a pianola in the house which later raised my awareness of the capabilities of the reproducing piano."

But Denis is also looking to the future with the aim of transferring his treasure trove of rolls on to floppy disc — a huge task but one which he has the energy to meet. "Like most hobbyists I am obsessive. My friends call it an obsession but I call it an enthusiasm!"