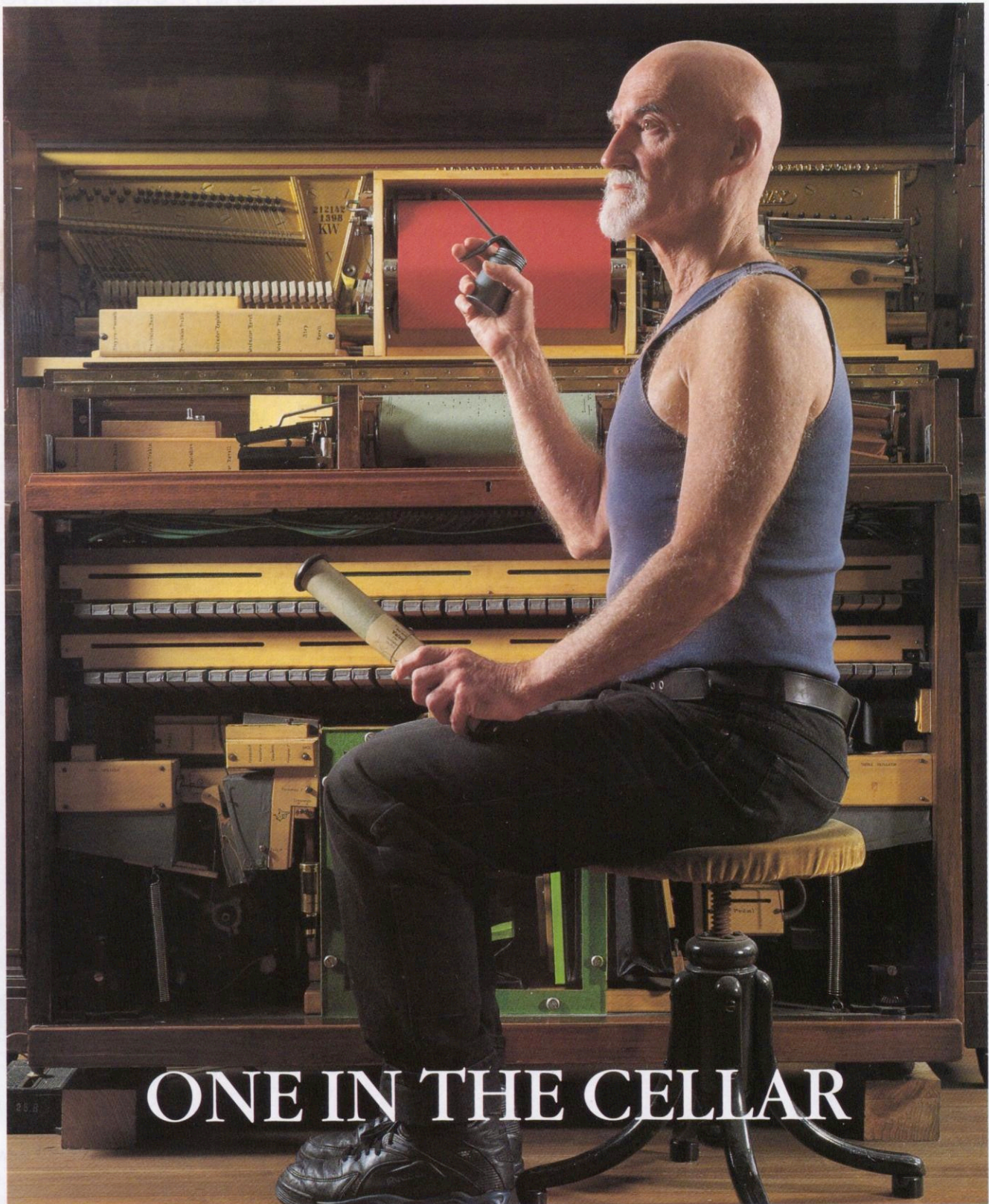


Collector's Items

DR FRANKENSTEIN BRINGS DEAD MAESTROS TO LIFE IN A LOFTY CHAMBER.

FOUR UP, TWO DOWN,



ONE IN THE CELLAR

“**R**achmaninov plays his prelude in C Sharp Minor in your front room!” was the catchcry when these ingenious machines first came out in the early 1900s. The reproducing piano was a cultural leap ahead of the player piano whose proud owner pedalled light and shade into the notes, the keys activated pneumatically via a punched scroll. The reproducing piano performed without human intervention and produced a faithful repetition of the original performance, keys bobbing and rippling at the maestro’s absent touch. Famous pianists jostled to be heard via these magnificent machines, an upright or a grand attached to a black box of levers, leathers, cones and bellows activated by a scroll and more recently by a floppy disk. The sound was far superior to that produced by a wax disc and a gramophone and still outclasses the most sophisticated recordings reproduced on the most expensive equipment.

When the 15-year-old Denis Condon came upon a reproducing piano “by accident” in 1948 the magnificent machines were down on their luck. The very few that had found their way to Australia were rotting. “The tubes perish, creatures eat the leathers. There was a rat’s nest in that Welte/Steinway when I bought it and the Rhönitz downstairs had been turned into a coin-operated gadget.”

The discovery came about because Denis’s father had a player piano and a bad heart. His doctors thought, erroneously, that pumping pedals would be bad for him. Mr Condon could not face a future without arpeggios flooding through the apartment; the doctors were adamant. That same week a reproducing piano was advertised for sale in Kings Cross. It was fate.

“Our piano tuner knew how these machines were put together but he left me to do the work. Within a week I’d bought 700 scrolls. They were gathering dust on music shop shelves.”

Denis now has 8,000 rolls and six operating machines plus one in the cellar that’s awaiting his Dr Frankenstein attentions. “Other collectors, especially in America, want to preserve the original but I just want the best sound and I use whatever bits and pieces I can come by.” The Duo-Art/Yamaha and the two Ampicos are American and his two Welte/Steinways are German. He missed out on the Rhönitz when it came up for auction in Melbourne. As luck would have it the buyer was unable to make it work. Denis took one look, knew he could get the mahogany beauty up and running. “He’d heard of me worse luck. Charged me three times what he’d paid for it. But it was worth it.”

A year or so ago engineers from Japan came at midnight to record Denis’s best rolls in order to produce CDs. “I was pleased because it meant that some rare performances would reach a larger public.” They sold like hot cakes throughout Japan and China but due to legal wrangles they can never be available here. “I don’t want to talk about it,” said Denis.

Denis has had open heart surgery and worked himself back into mint condition. “I expect you’re wondering what happens to all this when I die. It’s to be auctioned and the proceeds will fund a piano scholarship.”

On this steaming summer morning of our meeting the acoustics are shower-perfect for Chopin’s *Winter Wind* étude. The first eight notes tiptoe with menace. Silence. Then roaring turbulence. “Gertrude Peppercorn, New York, 1909,” says Denis. “She goes at it like a bull at a gate.”

BY ANNABEL FROST; PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG McBEAN

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