

The Fantastic Saga
of the
Siena Piano



According to legend, the Siena Piano is partly fashioned of wood from King Solomon's Temple. It now faces extinction due to gradual deterioration.

by KEN and NOËL GILMORE

FOR the past seven years, an Israeli piano technician named Avner Carmi has been in the United States on what he considers a holy mission. His quest: to persuade a reluctant world to accept what is to him one of the greatest musical treasures of all ages. The object of his enthusiasm is the Siena Piano, an ornately carved and decorated antique instrument which Carmi believes is the spiritual descendant of the Harp of David, and perhaps an actual, physical legacy dating from Biblical times. According to legend, the sounding board of the piano comes from wood which was once part of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem.

Carmi also believes that 13 years ago his remarkable instrument fulfilled the ancient prophecy that Israel would be free when King David's Harp once again played in the land. Says Carmi: "On November 30, 1947, the day when the United Nations was deciding whether a new Israel was to be or not to be . . . I stood at the piano, surrounded by my dear ones, giving the piano a last touch. At last I laid down my tools and announced, 'It is done, it is ready.' And behold! At that moment the air was filled with the glorious decision of the United Nations, and the Harp of King David was heard again!"

One of the piano's primary claims to fame is the fact that its sounding board is reputed to have come from Solomon's Temple. This, indeed, would make it an instrument beyond price. But in addition to its possible value as an irreplaceable historic artifact, it is also an instrument of unquestioned musical worth. Carmi feels that his reincarnated Harp of David has a tone fully as sweet and magical as that of the original instrument with which the shepherd boy drove the evil spirit from King Saul. In fact, Carmi frequently cites the exclamation of a celebrated pianist who spoke of the sound produced by the Siena Piano as being "the voice of God."

Modern critics—while hesitating to go quite this far—have judged it a fine, even magnificent, instrument. There is no denying that it is a remarkable instrument with a unique, singing tone, similar to both piano and harpsichord. The late Heitor Villa-Lobos said: "I love the Immortal Piano, its sound and its story equally." The famous French piano teacher, Lazare Lévy, on first playing the Siena Piano, turned to Carmi and said, "Carmi, I think the entire piano industry is on the wrong track." Critic David Randolph agrees with Carmi that the piano has the remarkable ability to sound like a harpsichord at times, and at other times to suggest a lute, harp, or guitar. Carmi holds that the Siena Piano has the unique quality of adapting itself to whatever music is played upon it. But most critics agree that it is best playing Mozart or Scarlatti, or perhaps the modern French impressionists, such as Debussy.

THE instrument's tone—like the tone of any piano—is determined by its sounding board. And certainly, if a color-

ful history has the power to affect an instrument's sound, the Siena Piano should have a voice like no other. The earliest legend of its sounding board begins in 70 A.D. when the Roman legions of Titus razed the temple at Jerusalem, and, as was the custom of the day, carted everything of value back to Rome. This event is recorded, among other places, on the Arch of Titus which still stands in Rome. On the arch is a relief which shows the treasure from Solomon's Temple being hauled away by Roman soldiers to the Eternal City.

Included in the prizes of war, according to the legend, were two wooden temple pillars known as Jachin and Boaz which had stood on either side of the temple's front entrance. They were taken to Rome and used in the construction of a pagan temple. Centuries later, the temple was destroyed and the pillars were given to the city of Siena, then preparing to build a Christian church. The pillars remained in Siena until the last decade of the 18th century when an earthquake destroyed the building. The historic pillars were splintered too badly to be used again.

In the church on the day of the earthquake was an aging piano maker—Sebastino Marchisio of Turin—who had been looking for a piece of wood suitable for a piano sounding board he had in mind. Marchisio was unhurt in the collapse of the church, and he was attracted by the sight and smell of the clear, splintered wood. After cutting into the fractured beam, he decided that this was the wood he had been seeking. Since the pillars were of no further use in the church, he was given permission to cut a sounding board out of one of them.

Although Marchisio planned, designed, and started the

Although the Siena Piano's main claim to fame is its legendary sounding board, it is, in addition, a striking example of early 19th Century Italian wood carving.





Especially fine is the carved area above the ancient instrument's keyboard.

piano, the job of completing it passed to his sons, and eventually to his grandsons. Frantic activity alternated with long periods of neglect, but finally the finishing touches were added by Nicodemo Ferri, Marchisio's great grandson. Ferri, one of Italy's foremost sculptors and wood carvers, and his cousin, Carlo Bartalozzi, decorated the piano with over twenty laughing, dancing, playing cherubs and a score of other designs, including harps, pipes, faces, lions, and other figures. The beautifully carved piano remained one of Siena's most treasured possessions until 1868, when it was given to King Umberto of Italy as a wedding present.

IT is difficult, of course, to separate the tightly woven web of myth and miracle surrounding the piano's origin. A Middle East expert at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art has said, for example, that while it is most unlikely that wood from Solomon's temple made its way to a Siene church, and thence into a piano, there is certainly no denying the possibility that it *could* have happened.

As for the stories of the pillars, Jachin and Boaz, practically all Biblical scholars agree that they were made of brass, as related in the First Book of Kings. Yet there were surely wooden pillars in the building, and one of them may have survived the fires that destroyed the temple on at least two occasions. There is no way, either, of knowing whether Titus' legions elected to carry away wooden pillars along with their other loot in 70 A.D. Even the story of old Marchisio and the splintered pillars inhabits that dim realm between history and legend.

Such considerations do not bother Carmi, however. "My wife and I believe," he says. "We believe everything."

As far as the Carmis are concerned, the piano is the spiritual descendent of the Harp of David, and it has played its part in the ancient prophecy of Israel's freedom. They also believe it is the literal descendent of those times.

Recently Carmi was asked, "What if, by some modern method such as Carbon 14 dating, it was proved that the wood of the sounding board is not from the time of Solomon's temple?"

"I don't want to know," he said, and that was that.

Sorting fact from legend may, indeed, in this case be

somewhat beside the point. It is fascinating to speculate about the piano's rich and varied history, but in the final analysis, one fact remains: The Siena Piano is a remarkable old instrument. It has a unique tonal quality that is felt by many to be of exceptional interest and musical worth. Its predilection for attracting stories, true or not, only serves to make it more fascinating.

AS fantastic as the legend of the piano's origin may be, this is but one aspect of its incredible history. Its modern career is every bit as spectacular as the ancient legend. And inextricably intertwined with it is the 20th century life of Avner Carmi: its owner, friend, protector, and champion.

According to Carmi his entire life has been deeply influenced by the Siena Piano. It was even responsible for his having been born in Israel. The story began in the latter part of the 19th century, when pianist Mattis Yanowsky, Carmi's grandfather, played in Rome for King Umberto. After the concert, Umberto told Yanowsky that he owned a unique and wonderful instrument whose sounding board was reputed to have been made from the wood of Solomon's temple. So wonderful was the tone of the piano, said the King, that it had become known as the Harp of David. Many, he related, felt that the piano had become imbued with the spirit of the ancient namesake.

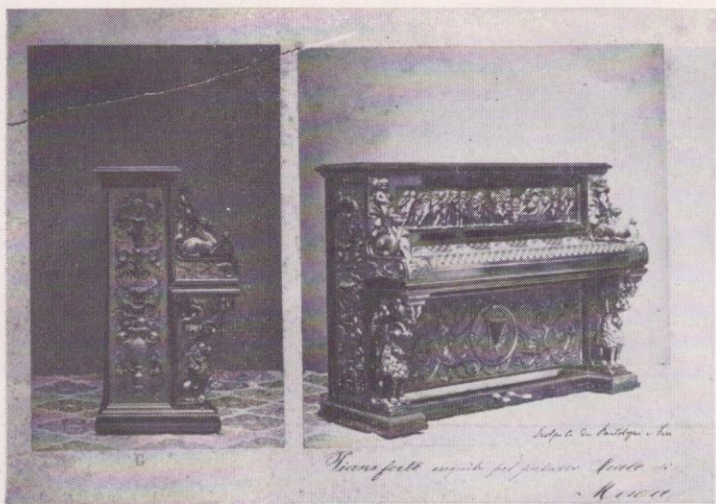
Yanowsky, a refugee from Czarist Russia, was at the time uncertain about where to settle. His wife and four children had been slain in a pogrom in Kiev. Only he and one son had managed to escape. As a devout Jew who felt a powerful, traditional tie with the Holy Land, he was inspired by the story of David's Harp and decided to take his son and settle in Palestine. The son grew up and married, and had a son of his own, Avner Carmi. Young Carmi was enchanted with his grandfather's story of the wonderful Harp of David, and vowed that some day he would see it.

As the boy grew to manhood, he planned a visit to Rome to look for the piano. But World War I interfered, and when he finally got to Italy, he was unable to see King Victor Emmanuel, who had succeeded Umberto to the throne. For the next five years he worked in Berlin, mastering the craft of the piano technician. On his return to Israel, once again he stopped in Rome for another try at seeing the piano. Again he failed to get an audience with the King.

Returning to Palestine, Carmi started to raise a family. Soon, he began to win some measure of fame as a piano technician, tuning pianos for such musical greats as Artur Rubinstein, Artur Schnabel, Alfred Cortot, and others.

In 1928, Carmi went to Rome again. This time he carried a letter from Gustave Lyon, president of France's famous Pleyel Piano Company, who had become his friend. Lyon's letter was to the manager of the Pleyel agency in Rome, who promised to find out what he could about the piano. A few days later he reported to Carmi that he had been in touch with every piano tuner who worked in the palace. None had seen an instrument such as Carmi described. But Carmi's faith in his grandfather's story remained unshaken.

In 1934 he went to Rome again—this time to buy parts for his now-flourishing piano business. While there he met



Carmi's initial clue that the Siena Piano might still exist were these 1868 photographs found in the archives of the city of Siena.

a friend who suggested that he try to see the King on one of his trips outside the palace. Victor Emmanuel, it seems, was so particular about the fish he ate that he appeared at Rome's fish market every Friday to select them himself.

Early the next Friday, Carmi was at the fish market. As soon as he spotted the King, he ran toward him and began to pour out his story. The King's bodyguards were understandably alarmed when someone, in the heat of the moment, cried, "Assassin!" The guards pounced on Carmi and dragged him off to the local police headquarters. He remained there until the officials got in touch with Schnabel who vouched for his character and his story of the piano.

On the same visit, Carmi met a Professor Leonardo who promised to find out anything he could about the piano. Again, there was disappointing news when Leonardo reported that none of the palace servants remembered ever having seen such an instrument.

It was 1939 before Carmi stumbled across his first tangible clue. In an encyclopedia he found a reference to a piano fitting the description passed down from his grandfather. According to the account, the instrument had been given to King Umberto as a wedding present by the city of Siena.

Although Italy in 1939 was on the verge of war, Carmi was now too hot on the trail to hesitate. He went to Siena and talked to an aging priest, organist at the Cathedral, who again related the legend of Solomon's temple. And in the archives of the city, Carmi found an official account of the gift including several photographs of the piano and its carvings, and its history. The piano, he found, had been built by the Marchisio family and decorated by the eminent sculptors, Ferri and Bartalozzi. In Siena, the piano had been taken to the Cathedral once a year for use in celebrating the annual wine festival. It was exhibited at the Paris Exposition in 1867 where it created a sensation. Upon the marriage of Umberto, the Siena city fathers, casting around for a suitable gift, decided that only one thing was fine enough—the Siena Piano.

When Carmi arrived back in Rome after his trip to Siena, the trail had grown hot. Leonardo had managed to get an audience with Victor Emmanuel himself, and had asked about the piano. The King said there was indeed such a

piano, but it had been taken to the palace at Monza, which explained why servants in the Rome palace had not seen it. Just as Carmi got this news, Italy entered World War II, and he barely managed to escape before the borders were closed by the totalitarian regime.

During the war, the paths of Carmi and the piano he had been seeking most of his life began to cross in a series of breath-taking coincidences. Carmi enlisted in a transport unit of the British Eighth Army. One day in 1942, his unit, with the aid of a mine sweeper, found an old piano buried in the desert sand. It was obviously of an Italian make and had probably been confiscated by the Germans in Italy, brought to North Africa, then abandoned after the German defeat at El Alamein. Carmi, the only one in his unit who knew anything about pianos, dug it out and found that it had been coated on the outside with plaster. The inside was so clogged with sand that even though he could open the lid and get to the keyboard, he could get no sound from the instrument. As for the plaster, he surmised that it had been applied in an effort to protect the piano's wood from the climate. He saw it carted away and, in the press of circumstances, forgot about it.

Then in 1943, his wife ran across a strange plastered piano in a junk market in Tel Aviv. The owner told her that it had arrived with other wrecked pianos from the British salvage depot. Through a series of adventures—during which the plastered piano narrowly missed being destroyed—it finally came to rest at the Carmi workshop shortly after the war. A plasterer drove up with it in a truck and wanted to know if Carmi could repair it. He had come upon it by accident, and was struck by the fact that it was covered with a coating of plaster. Never having seen a piano which so clearly showed evidence of his trade, he decided to have it repaired. Carmi told him it would cost a fortune just to remove the plaster.

But the plasterer didn't want it removed. In fact, he meant to add more plaster to refine the job and then decorate it with pictures of birds and angels. He left a deposit, but before Carmi could start on the job, the plasterer changed his mind. He decided to abandon the piano and came back to the shop demanding the return of his deposit. He pounded on the piano with his fist to emphasize his demands. Carmi returned the money, and after the plasterer had left, Carmi's young daughters made a startling discovery. A piece of the plaster had been dislodged by the pounding. One of the children picked it up and found that it was an intaglio of a carved figure. Frantically, Carmi began to look for the place from which the plaster had fallen. In Carmi's words, "There in the wood that now stood revealed was a beautiful little cherub beating a small drum—as if to summon the whole world around the piano.

"Straightway I pulled from my pocket the picture of the King's piano and compared the carved figure that had been hidden. Then I cried joyously, 'That's the boy . . . This is the King's piano. The Harp of King David.'"

With 24 gallons of acetone and months of labor, the Carmis managed to soak, chip, and scrape the plaster from the elaborately decorated case. But this was just the first problem. Piano parts were so scarce in 1945 that Carmi could find none with which to repair his prize. It had been stripped of its readily accessible parts. The bridges and ribs were missing. There were no strings, no action. The sounding board—to Carmi, the board of sacred wood—was splitting and crumbling. "Had this been an ordinary piano, I would simply have replaced the old sounding board with

a new one. But in the case of the Siena, to remove its sounding board would have left nothing but its case and its history. The sounding board had to be retained and repaired at all costs."

It took Carmi more months to restore the piece of spruce that, according to legend, was more than two thousand years old. He then calculated and designed the layout of strings on the sounding board; he mounted, braced, and stretched them—a delicate job with the fragile board. Needing an action, he took parts from twelve old pianos in his shop—pianos he had bought to repair and sell to get his business going again after the war. Thus the action was part French, part Italian, part German. Carmi felt that this makeshift arrangement would at least do the job until something better came along. In the meantime it would serve as a symbol of the international character of the piano.

The reconstruction work was marred by many mishaps. At one point, when Carmi slightly miscalculated the four bridges, the sounding board split badly when the strings were tightened. He had to start all over again.

Finally, after three years, he finished the demanding job of restoring the piano and, as the new legend reports, the revitalized Harp of David rang out on the day that Israel regained its freedom, thus fulfilling the ancient prophecy.

Since Carmi arrived in this country in 1953, his promotional efforts on behalf of the piano have been untiring. *Time* magazine carried the story of the Siena Piano in 1955. Carmi and the piano have appeared on nationwide radio and TV—he was on the Dave Garroway program twice. So far, seven records have been made and released,* some of them selling fairly well, and Columbia Records has confirmed that plans to make further recordings are under consideration. This year a book written by Carmi and his wife, Hannah, sets forth the story of the piano in great detail.**

But still, he feels, the world is slow to grasp the importance of the profound musical gift he is attempting to bestow upon it, and time is running out. The ancient works of the piano are crumbling almost as rapidly as Carmi can keep them in repair. During the recording sessions in 1955 and 1956, he would scurry into the studio after each take and readjust, retune, and putter with the delicate, aging mechanism before the next take could be made. At one point, where there was a trill in the music, the actions of the two adjacent keys involved could not be balanced to get a smooth sound. Eventually, the head recording engineer, Jerry Newman, taped five minutes of steady trill, isolated the most even-sounding section, and spliced it into the recording at the appropriate spot.

Carmi finally decided to replace the entire action. Since the sounding board and strings are not built to established standards, the entire mechanism had to be adapted by hand and carefully fitted to the ancient sounding board. Only when this operation had been completed could the recording project be finished. Even then, within a year or two Carmi began to feel that nothing short of a complete restoration would put the piano back into usable shape. Mr. Harry J. Sohmer, president of Sohmer Piano Company, decided to help Carmi after he heard the story of the piano: "We felt that it was an interesting and historical piano, and should be restored. The sounding board needed major repairs. We also put in new strings, and although the action

* Esoteric 3000/04; Counterpoint 1503, 3005—all recorded under the production and engineering supervision of Jerry Newman.

** *The Immortal Piano* by Avner and Hannah Carmi; Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, 1960.



Today the Siena Piano resides in stately grandeur at the home of Avner and Hannah Carmi, shown above.

was in fair shape and usable we decided to make a clean sweep while we were about it and put in a brand new action." Altogether, the Sohmer Company spent over \$2,000 and nearly a year on the piano.

But even this complete restoration, Carmi feels, is only a brief reprieve. He says the ancient sounding board is crumbling beyond repair, in spite of all efforts to save it. Although scores of cracks have been meticulously refilled and reglued with slivers of new wood, then sanded smooth again, new ones are still showing up in the ancient spruce. Within five years, he says, the damage will be too great to repair and the Harp of David will be lost to the world forever. In the meantime, he must see that its delicate, fragile voice is recorded again and again while there is still time.

In spite of the lack of universal recognition of the piano's unique musical quality, Carmi feels it must come. Probably no other feeling is possible for him, so strong is his personal involvement and identification with the piano. "It is like my flesh and blood," he says. Perhaps pianist Artur Schnabel—for whom Carmi once tuned pianos—put it most succinctly when he said: "Sometimes it happens that an ordinary man falls in love with the King's daughter, or an ordinary woman falls in love with the King's son. But Carmi, pianoman extraordinary, has simply fallen in love with the King's piano."

And although Schnabel made this statement many years ago, this love affair is, today, more alive than ever.

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