

# MUSICAL SEANCE WITH THE GREAT

By MARGARET JONES

Denis Condon is a Sydney schoolmaster who owns three private time machines.

THE other night, at his house at Brighton-le-Sands, it was 1906 as well as 1964—for Grieg was playing his own *Berceuse*, Op. 38.

He was a sick man, with only a year to live, but there is nothing of a dying fall about this music. The notes rise from the keyboard pure and vigorous, the keys struck as though at that moment by invisible hands.

Would you like to travel forward a little in time? Then it is 1919, and Saint-Saens, also nearing death, is playing *Valse Langoureuse* with an angry, vivid attack. (Someone said of him that he had a touch like Sonny Liston.)

If you are nostalgic for the twenties, let's go back to 1927, and listen to jazzman Adam Carroll belting out *Ain't She Sweet*. It's the

rich distillation of a whole dead era.

All through the evening, the keyboards of the big grands speak sweetly or sharply, explode in forgotten brilliance, mimic exactly the styles (now archaic) of pianists long dead.

The eerie thing is that though the notes depress, are stabbed at fiercely or fingeringly caressed, no one is sitting on the piano stool.

Denis Condon's time machines are those rare and almost forgotten devices, recording pianos. He has three handsome grands now, and has worked his way through nine since he started collecting them 15 years ago, when he was a school-boy.

## PRICELESS

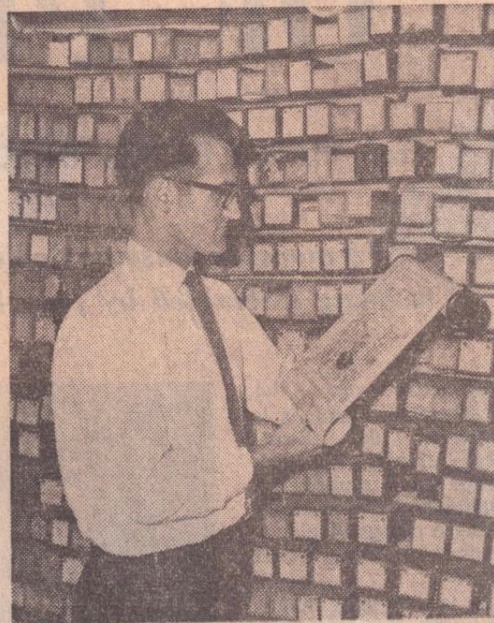
He has also one of the biggest collections of recording piano rolls in the world: nearly 4,000 of them, ranging from the priceless Grieg roll of 1906, through the greatest pianists of the century (like Leschetizky, Busoni, the early Moiseiwitsch) to jazz of the twenties and thirties.

It's hard to describe recording pianos. If you say "electric pianos," it conjures up a honky-tonk image, far removed from the elegant concert instruments they are. And, of course, any mention of player pianos or pianolas makes the true collector twitch all over with horror.

Recording pianos were invented in 1904 by a certain Edwin Welte, a German maker of organs, who called his instrument the Welte-Mignon (the little Welte).

The piano is worked by electric power, using paper rolls of apparently indestructible virtuosity, and Welte had no trouble getting the finest pianists of the day to "record" for him.

Not only did the new instrument preserve for all time the actual performance,



Nearly 4,000 rolls

but it also faithfully transcribed the style, touch, idiosyncrasies, and even the personality of the pianist.

The old Moiseiwitsch, for instance, was deeply moved listening to rolls made by the young Moiseiwitsch, though he tut-tutted over the style.

When Busoni's widow, some months after his death, heard one of his Welte rolls, the effect was so intense that she ran from the music salon screaming, "Ferruccio! Ferruccio!"

## EXPENSIVE

Between 1904 and about 1930 (until radio displaced them), other firms made and sold recording pianos. Because of their price (1,000 guineas or so in those days was a fortune), they remained, unlike player-pianos, largely a rich man's toy.

Built into splendidly ornate concert grands, the machines graced the drawing-rooms of film stars, dictators (Mussolini had one), and princes.

Denis Condon, whose 15-year devotion to recording pianos grew out of a casual family interest in pianolas, now has three: an Ampico in a Marshall and Wendell grand, a Chickering and a Duo-Art.

He found them (and their

predecessors) at sales, down-at-heel, out of order and humiliated. Lacking any tutor, he taught himself to repair them and now they gleam with opulent well-being.

At the drop of a quaver, Mr Condon can turn you on a full-scale musical seance. Close your eyes, and you will assume the pianist is in the room—which rarely happens even with the best records.

Open them, and you can watch the keyboard come to life, which is even more unnerving.

Debussy, Ravel, Robert Schmitz, Schnabel, Faure, Stravinsky, Kreisler (in his only recorded appearances as a pianist), Rachmaninov, Paderewski, Rubinstein; or jazz, blues, dance tunes, college songs, honky tonk—you name it, he's got it.

## SEARCHING

But one thing Mr Condon has **not** got is a Welte-Mignon recording piano, and this he wants with all the fervour of long dedication.

"For 15 years, I have been looking for a Welte-Mignon," he says. "They must exist in this country, because the rolls are here.

"But in all those years of searching, I have only seen one, and couldn't buy it.

"Somebody, somewhere must have a Welte-Mignon. If only I knew where!"