

Old instrument is a prized exhibit

It was through a slight mishap that Denis Condon, a lecturer in music at the Sydney Teachers' College, became interested in recording pianos.

His father, greatly interested in pianolas and piano players bought an Ampico reproducing piano — not really knowing what it was — for his schoolboy son.

Now, 27 years later, with a collection of over 6,000 piano rolls (one of the best in the world), and an impressive number of recording pianos, Mr Condon has just finished a series of lectures at the Piano Communications Research Seminar, held last month as part of the International Piano Competition.

Mr Condon's Vorsetzer was star attraction at the recent Opera House Piano Fare Exhibition.

When interviewed at the Rose Music display stand he admitted his hobby had affected his life.

"I would not have met all the people I have, without my interest in reproducing pianos," Mr Condon said.

Unlike the do-it-yourself pianola, the reproducing piano has its own "recorded" paper rolls that allow the piano to play, using an air-pumping mechanism within itself.

The rolls and the pianos dated back to the early part of this century. Grieg, for instance, recorded his *Berceuse, Op. 38* in 1906. A button pressed in 1977 in Mr Condon's Newtown home, reproduces the 1906 recording.

If you prefer Debussy's *La Cathedrale Engloutie*, played by the master himself, you can hear it with his exacting technique and emotional intensity.

Although there has been much controversy about the accuracy of these recordings, the pianist Moiseiwitsch, after listening to his recordings made years before, thought they were accurate.

The range of works actually recorded by the composers themselves in Mr Condon's collection includes Rachmaninoff, Paderewski, Ravel, Faure and Stravinsky.

Mr Condon restores most of his pianos. His 1905 Welte-Mignon Vorsetzer "push-

up" reproducing piano with 80 "fingers" and two "feet", took him two years to restore.

Just recently he bought his latest "treasure", a Welte-Steinway, made in 1912. This will also take him about two years to recondition.

Now he is building his own reproducing push-up.

The first reproducing piano was made in 1904 by a German, Edwin Welte, who called his instrument the Welte-Mignon (little Welte). So popular was his invention that by 1907, he had made enough money to begin building his pianos in America.

This came to an end for Welte in 1917 when his American company was sold to the New York Pneumatic Action Company by the U.S. Government as alien property.

The Welte-Mignon was modified and became the Welte-Mignon Licensee, which used a different size roll, designed for easier recording.

By 1911, the Ampico recording piano had appeared, taking its name from its manufacturer, the American Piano Company.

And in 1913 a third recording piano was made. This was the Duo-Art.

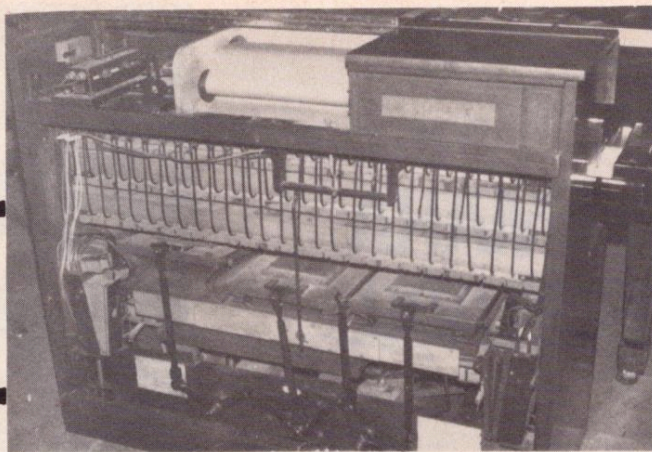
Radio and the Depression ended manufacture of this type of piano in 1930.

The difficulty with reproducing pianos, is their paper roll-size varies. This means that collectors have to buy all three makes of recording piano.

Presently Mr Condon is in San Francisco participating in the Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association Fifth International Convention.

Mr Condon's collection is a great resource for the Australian music world. The Australian contemporary composer, Nigel Butterley has recorded a piano roll, playing it on one of Mr Condon's pianos as part of his composition, *Watershore* — the ABC's recorded entry for this year's Italia Prize.

Denis Condon's collection is for the people. He has willed it to the National Library in Canberra.



Mr Denis Condon pictured with his Ampico at the Piano Fare Exhibition, Sydney Opera House.



The Ampico reproducing piano fits over the keyboard of a grand piano and plays the keys via fingerlike levers. Two larger levers play the pedals.