

# Piano man keeping era alive

IF you walk down a Newtown back street on any given day you might hear some of the world's finest music being played by great pianists such as Paderewski, Rachmaninoff and Ravel.

The music emanates from one of Denis Condon's reproducing pianos.

Denis has a collection of these amazing instruments throughout his terrace and they can reproduce the tunes of about 700 of the world's most respected pianists.

To the layman a reproducing piano is an advanced pianola which was very popular in the upper echelons of society in the 1920s.

Like a pianola it plays the music by itself, reading a roll with the tune punched into it. But reproducing pianos go one step further. The tunes sound perfect, including soft and loud notes, as if the pianist was actually playing.

The quality of the reproduction (caused by bellows operated by vacuums) is the thing that keeps Denis interested.

His pianos number 10, although two are yet to be restored, and he has more than 8000 rolls of music.

Denis was 15 when he first

by **BEDE CARMODY**

saw a reproducing piano which his father had bought.

"I wasn't interested at first but when I saw it was a grand piano and the names on the rolls I began to do some research into them," Denis said.

Forty-two years on and the research has become a hobby - Denis devotes all his spare time to the upkeep and restoration of this musical phenomenon.

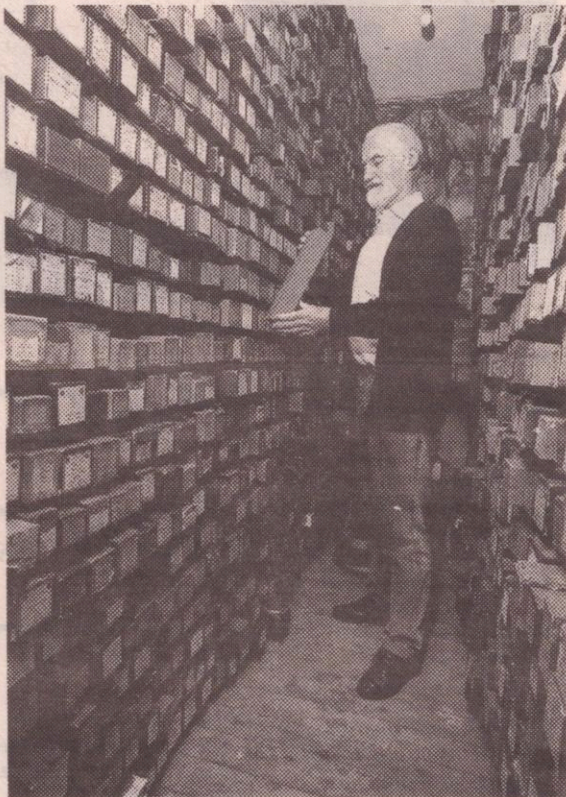
Denis said the first reproducing piano was made in 1906 and they were popular until World War II.

In those days the pianos were a symbol of luxury and no wonder, Denis has a 1913 Welte-Mignon model that "cost as much as a Rolls Royce in those days".

There were five companies throughout the world then making reproducing pianos.

Denis said this was one reason the pianos faded out - each company produced its own rolls which were incompatible with other companies' pianos.

He also attributes their demise to an improvement in the quality of



**Denis Condon contemplating which famous pianist he'll hear from next**  
Photo: Paul Melville

gramophone records, the low cost of a wireless, deterioration of materials used to make the pianos, and the depression.

But if Denis has his way the sound of the machines will never disappear.

He has begun to put some

of the works on CD.

Under the name, the Condon Collection, SBS Music has released four CDs - works by Gershwin, Stravinsky, Horowitz and The Recital collection. And there's enough material for at least another 20.