

THE QUEST FOR LISZT



Liszt in 1859

'When Liszt played the piano, ladies flung their jewels on the stage instead of bouquets. They shrieked in ecstasy and sometimes fainted. Liszt did not give mere concerts; they were saturnalia.' (H. C. Schonberg —'The Great Pianists')

Was it his 'divine' good looks and personal magnetism? Was he an extremely clever 'P.R.' man, or was he actually a great musician with a dazzling bravura technique and perhaps even a touch of genius? Undoubtedly he was a combination of all these factors. The point is, will we ever really know? When a man creates such a commotion during his own lifetime even the reports of his contemporaries might be suspected of exaggeration. We want to judge for ourselves. We want to hear him play!

SOUND asked Denis Condon was there any hope that a piano roll of Liszt might be mouldering away in some European attic. He thinks it most unlikely. The earliest rolls of any important artist only go back as far as 1904. There were primitive recordings made much earlier than this and there is always the very remote possibility that some devoted admirer did capture a performance of the great Abbe. However, until such a hypothetical recording comes to light we will never know where lies the fact or the fiction of his legend.

It does seem ironic that one of the greatest showmen in musical history, the man who would have loved to be 'immortalised' seems to have just missed out by a very short time. On the other hand, perhaps it is just as well. There are reports that his technique became quite inadequate in his old age. Perhaps he would have rejected this sort of immortality himself. Better to remain in legend an incomparable virtuoso than to be discovered to be a fumbling and musically irresponsible old man.

This is not the case however with many other of the great pianists of the early part of this century. Liszt's most renowned pupil, the magnificent Moritz Rosenthal, has left his magic for us on a series of Ampico Piano Rolls. Some of these performances are available on the Argo Record 'The Golden Age of Piano Virtuosi' (DA42).

Denis Condon, our Australian expert, has proved to be a most interesting and valuable source of information on this whole subject. He has a huge library of some 5,000 piano rolls, probably one of the largest collections in the world. It was an enormously exciting experience to hear on his superbly restored pianos (of which he has seven, five of them grands), some of the master pianists of the past. The rolls sound so extraordinarily real and immediate that one is left with the eerie sensation of almost 'seeing' the ghosts of the pianists sitting in front of the rapidly moving keys.

Some years ago Denis Condon, who is music teacher at Sydney's Fort Street Boys' High School, spent twelve months overseas under the Commonwealth Teaching Exchange Scheme. This gave him the opportunity to meet collectors in Europe and America and to add to his collection of rolls. We need hardly say at this point that if you have an aged aunt who has a hoard of piano rolls tucked away in a disused cupboard you should contact Mr Condon immediately —his delight would be unrestrained.

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Denis Condon

One of the earliest efforts made to produce music mechanically was by means of the Aeolian harp — a simple device, strings stretched across a resonator vibrated softly when placed in a draught. Since this ancient device there have always been men who devoted their lives to producing ever-more elaborate mechanical orchestra. But the most sophisticated wrote for a musical clock. Beethoven wrote his 'Battle of Vittoria' for Maelzel's Panharmonicon, a mechanical orchestra. But the most sophisticated of all such mechanical musical instruments were the reproducing pianos of the first twenty-five years of this century. These instruments have been much in the news lately, mainly because of the fine Argo records released in 1966 of the Ampico reproducing piano.

It is hard to visualise a world in which every drug store and bar had its 'Coinola' or 'Nickelodeon' and the chief entertainment in the house was the player piano. Foot impelled player pianos, in the hands (or feet) of skilled 'pianolists', were capable of musical performances and they had a great 'do-it-yourself' appeal. However, in the main, purchasers of the 'pianola' were more often carried away with the delights of pumping out dance tunes, the louder the better. The reproducing piano was an extension of the player piano, and it always lived in the shadow of the mechanical sounding instrument which gave it birth. The reproducing piano manufacturer had to make his customers realise that they were not buying a player piano or a home version of that wheezy coin operated street piano at the corner shop. They were buying an instrument which would bring the personality of the greatest living pianists into their parlors—Aeolus would sigh from an electric bellows. Living in a world surrounded by pneumatically operated musical instruments, the salesman in the piano showroom had to do some fast talking to convince his customer that the extra \$400 or more needed to purchase a reproducing piano was money well spent. Sales were never easy—in the peak year of 1923, out of a total of 205,556 player pianos sold in the USA, only 20,661 were reproducers.

If you had about £1,000 to spare in the 1920s you could visit the showrooms of Steinway, Baldwin, Bluthner or any of the great piano makers and pick and choose between various systems of reproducers



Denis Condon fits a roll to one of his seven restored player pianos.

Part of the collection of 5,000 piano rolls owned by Denis Condon.

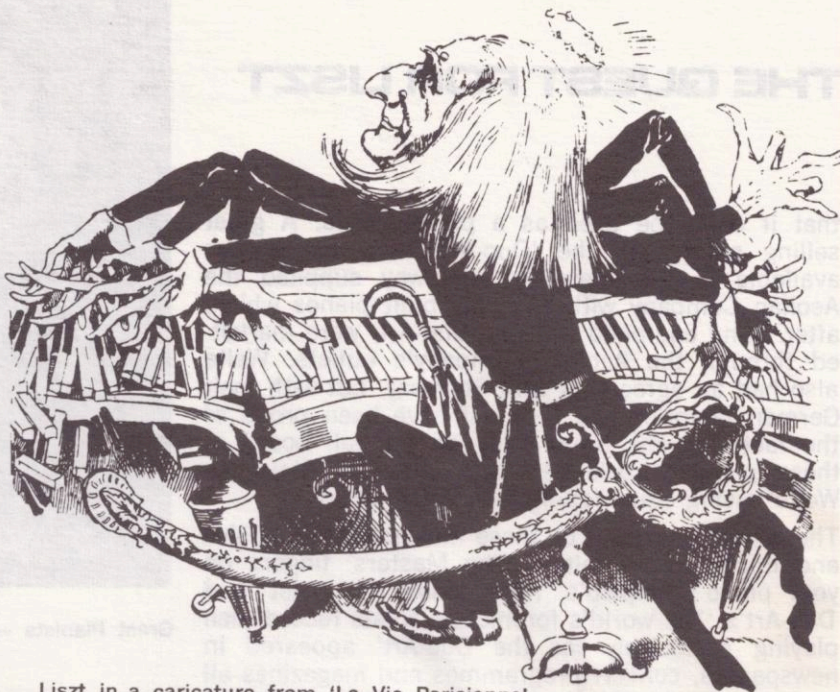


installed in their grand or upright pianos. If you bought an Ampico (in a Mason & Hamlin, Bosendorfer or Broadwood piano) you could hear Rachmaninoff in your own living room playing your piano. If you bought a Duo-Art (in a Steinway, Weber or Gaveau piano) Paderewski or Pachmann (without the grunts) could entertain your dinner guests. If a Welte-Mignon (in a Bechstein, Baldwin or some 112 different makes of piano) took your fancy you could thrill to Debussy or Mahler playing their own music or hear Friedheim or Stavenhagen give authoritative performances of the works of their teacher Franz Liszt.

Competition between these three main manufacturers was bitter—a real factor in their eventual demise. Ampico mechanisms would play only Ampico rolls and so on, so the salesman could look forward to 'consumer' contact in the future with the customer he had captured. In 1924 the Business Training Corporation of New York issued a 250 page course in Ampico salesmanship for the Ampico Corporation—this must have been one of the first 'scientific' courses in salesmanship; pity the poor customer who so much as made an innocent enquiry of such a well armed salesman, that customer's pocket must have been as good as empty in the first few minutes.

Edwin Welte began it all in Germany's Black Forest in 1904—his family had already been makers of orchestrions and band organs for sixty years. These huge, non-transportable mechanical orchestras led him to call his new electrically driven reproducer the 'Welte-Mignon' — the 'little Welte'. At first this instrument was a 'push-up', the machine was housed in a cabinet which was wheeled up to the piano so that its 80 felt 'fingers' and two 'feet' would operate the piano keys and pedals — later this mechanism was installed inside pianos. Those original push-up versions of the Welte-Mignon are now exceedingly rare, and the fortunate collector who owns one can hear his roll collection on the finest concert grands available to him—they were by no means a primitive version of what was to come later, the work of Welte's family for the sixty years before, in a similar field, ensured this. So Welte's invention was sensational and soon his recording rooms in Frieberg were echoing with the feeble tinkering of the elderly and sick Grieg—the fire of the mature Busoni—here was a Mecca for pianists where they could 'perpetuate their art for posterity' and they believed it too! Welte sold his 'Mignon' to statesmen and emperors, he prospered quickly and opened a factory in New York in 1907.

Charles Stoddard had made a fortune as the inventor of the pneumatic mailing tube. Working in New York



Liszt in a caricature from 'La Vie Parisienne'. 'He wears the sword of honour presented by the Hungarian nation, but does not bother to use it as he has found that he can destroy the piano much easier with his fingers alone.'

he was dissatisfied with the sounds of player pianos he heard about him, so he set about to improve the pianola. He hawked his reproducer around to a few piano makers, and it was eventually bought by the American Piano Company which, in fine American style, named it 'the Ampico' after itself. This was 1911, but it was to be another five years before the Ampico was publicly exhibited at a concert at which Leopold Godowsky played and was heard playing the same works on the Ampico. Charles Stoddard stayed with his brain-child, improving and perfecting its performance in the Ampico Research Laboratory right up to the stock market crash in 1929 which saw the virtual end of all reproducing piano manufacture.

Like the American Piano Company, the Aeolian Company was a trust of a number of piano makers but with a difference — they had already made hundreds of thousands of dollars from the manufacture of the 'Pianola', a name which was to become a standard one for all player pianos. In 1913 when the Aeolian Company first marketed the 'Duo-Art Pianola' its powers as a reproducer were considered by its makers to be additional to the (to them) important fact that it was a player piano at which a 'pianolist' could 'interpret' ordinary player rolls. This 'dual-art' gave the instrument its name and right to the end the 'Duo-Art' reproducer was manufactured with a good deal of extra mechanism, so

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that it could be used as a player piano. A great selling point with the 'Duo-Art' was that it was available in the Steinway. Steinway supplied the Aeolian Company with specially built pianos which, after being equipped with the Duo-Art, were marketed through the Aeolian Company's outlets. Welte also had an agreement with Steinway, but with their German factories and he must have been proud of the fact that the brass inlay on the fall board of these pianos proclaimed them as the 'Steinway-Welte' giving equal lettering to both names.

The advertising used by these makers was extensive and imaginative—Welte's 'The Masters' fingers on your piano'; Ampico's 'Re-enacting the artist' and Duo-Art's 'The world's foremost pianists record their playing exclusively for the Duo-Art' appeared in newspapers, concert programmes and magazines all over the world. These advertisements usually included in them some scientific jargon on why the mechanics of such a system were superior, or an endorsement from a famous pianist who happened to be an 'exclusive' artist for that system. Often these advertisements would include a photograph of a reproducer in the home of a titled or wealthy family with suitable lists of other famous people whose 'lives were enriched' by the 'artistry' at their disposal. It would seem the Vatican was well supplied with all three systems, while the drawing room at Sandringham Palace must have looked like a piano showroom.

In addition to these three systems, a number of other makes of reproducing piano achieved limited success, 'Angelus-Artrio' and 'Art-Echo' in the US and, with an impressive array of pianists (including Cortot and Bachaus) and a large, fine catalogue of rolls, Hupfeld's 'Triphonola' in Germany.

How was personality and the 'soul of piano playing' captured and, later, released by a paper roll. The actual recording process was always kept a guarded secret by the companies involved, probably for two reasons: at first such recording processes may have been primitive, while the rhythm and pedal control was accurately recorded, the dynamics may have been guessed by competent technicians who had charge of the whole process: later, as methods of recording dynamics developed (Ampico used a system which involved the photographing of the hammer velocity as the artist recorded) it was really necessary to keep these processes secret from competitors.



Great Pianists — Busoni



Rosenthal
Serge Prokofiev in 1918

After editing and careful transference these recordings were eventually made up into master rolls which contained not only perforations to operate the keys and pedals of the piano, but also as many as twenty separate perforations which operated the complex dynamic control devices which all reproducing pianos contain. There can be no doubt that these dynamic controls were as effective, flexible and as efficient as the human muscle. Atmospheric pressure applied to a partial vacuum was used to achieve results. A pneumatic impulse travels at the speed of sound, about 800 miles an hour—a good deal faster than the 60 miles an hour of nerve impulses from brain to fingers. So dynamic valves in reproducing pianos from the whispered pianissimo to the thundering, string-breaking fortissimo were astonishingly well controlled. The dynamic valve in the Ampico moves less than $3/16$ " between these extremes. So perhaps Josef Hofmann may have been near the truth when he said: 'The performance of the Duo-Art has its source in the mind of the artist and is as much a product of his imagination as when he plays in person'.

How authentic are these rolls as documents of the past? Can we listen to Fannie Bloomfield-Ziesler on the Welte or the Ampico and say that this is how she sounded? We will never know. George Copeland (who was once Melba's pianist) has refuted all his rolls, yet Benno Moiseiwitch, during BBC recording sessions of Ampico rolls in 1962 was exceedingly moved by his youthful performances. When asked to comment he said that, if this were a young pianist playing for him, he would have thought that he



Paderewski in 1923 after his term as
Prime Minister of Poland

The young Moriz Rosenthal

'pulled the rhythm around too much', but he agreed that the performances, specially in the matter of phrasing and dynamics, were his own. Schonberg, long a disbeliever in the authenticity of piano rolls, writing in 'The Gramophone' in December 1966 said: 'There is no denying that Argo has come up with by far the most realistic piano roll transfers I have ever heard, and I have had to revise my estimate of the process'. Other critics, prejudiced against all reproducing pianos are in a quandry of indecision — a poor performance on a roll will have them saying 'See, we told you so, these machines cannot reproduce the artist's performance', yet again a fine performance, such as Rosenthal's wonderful roll of the Chopin Etude in thirds from Op. 25 will have them crying 'Fake, Fake'. Surely the truth lies somewhere in between.

The pianists who made rolls thought they were authentic at the time. It is easy to say that some pianists will give endorsements freely and with little discrimination, but these catalogues, Welte, Ampico and Duo-Art, involve more than 700 artists, including every great name of the time — an overwhelming tribute to the sincerity of the roll producers.

There was a deal of editing involved in the process (akin to our modern tape editing) and in a few cases — Bauer and Grainger to name two — the pianists were so enthusiastic about making rolls that they learnt to do their own editing and even took master rolls home to work on them!

When discussing this problem of authenticity it might be thought that the simple course to take would be to play rolls to some present day great names that they

made in their youth; after all, Brailowsky, Noraes, Darre, Arrau, Horowitz and Cherkassky are still with us and their Ampico, Duo-Art and Welte rolls are available. Here there are difficulties — pianists change their style, specially in forty or fifty years, as Moisiejewitch mentioned earlier. Add to this change in style the problem of finding reproducers in first class condition, well adjusted and installed in fine pianos and it is obvious that the task is not so simple. The ABC is planning a symposium on this question of piano roll authenticity in the near future. It will take the form of a discussion involving John Hopkins, Ralph Collins, Ralph Mace and the present writer—this discussion will be interspersed with performances taken from rolls. All we can be certain of in respect of authenticity is that when we play a roll on a well-adjusted reproducing piano that this is the way the pianist wanted to be heard.

Any uncertainty on these questions of truthful performance does not in any way impair the deep impression of atmosphere, presence and immediate involvement that listening to a restored reproducing piano can give. The thousands of rolls of fine performances carrying names like Landowska, Levitski, Scriabine, Myra Hess, even Fritz Kreisler can give endless enjoyment to the fortunate owner of one of these machines. The owner of a large roll collection can learn much about piano playing by comparing performances of the same work by different artists (Chopin's F sharp Nocturne from Op. 15 can be heard played by Scharwenka, Busoni, Raoul Pugno, Saint-Saens, Ornstein, Artur Rubinstein, Bauer, Ernest Schelling, Novaes, Pachmann, d'Albert and Paderewski).

Because rolls for these three systems were not interchangeable there was a great deal of duplication of music and, in some cases, performances. Many pianists recorded their 'pet' performances for at least two of the systems. This can make collecting interesting, but it can also be frustrating—a collector can end up with ten performances of Wagner's 'Liebestod' arranged by Liszt and be desperate to find one roll of a late Beethoven sonata.

Welte's catalogue was almost twice as big as the other two—he was in the business a good ten years before them. Yet all three catalogues remain as a monument to the quality and diversity of taste of the American piano buying public of fifty years ago. Of course, there were hundreds of rolls of salon music for which there is no place in today's repertoire, and there were thousands of rolls of dance music played by the most able exponents of this special art, George Gershwin, Ferde Grofe, Eddie Duchin, Zez Confrey, Richard Rodgers, Vincent Youmans and, using Delius-like chords coupled with a technique second to none, the legendary Lee Sims. This huge

collection of dance music—they are now the rarest of the reproducing rolls—makes fascinating listening to anyone interested in the apparent decline of popular music. Not so much for the personality of the performers, but for the original and imaginative arrangements of the 'hits' of the day.

The student of piano playing will find inspiration in the finest playing as well as interest and amusement in the eccentric performances. Granados, Prokofiev, Dohnanyi or Bartok play their own music well. Stravinsky plays a piano sonata which he wrote specially for the Duo-Art—it was published later, but in 1924 it could only be heard by medium of the Duo-Art—he also arranged the whole of the 'Fire-bird' Ballet, which he plays on a series of six Duo-Art rolls. These rolls also contain an analysis of the music printed as the music progresses — at the beginning of each roll themes and motives are played and discussed for that particular part of the work—a fascinating document. Complete sets of these rolls are indeed rare now. Faure, Glazounov, d'Indy and Mascagni sound adequate in their own works, while neither Ravel's nor Leoncavallo's reputation as performers is enhanced by his rolls.

Schnabel's series of rolls dates from before 1920 even though he made no gramophone records until 1932—his rolls of Bach's 'Italian Concerto' are interesting. The style is too romantic to be acceptable these days, yet many of his ideas are logical and well worth hearing. Two pianists whose presence is astonishingly real on rolls are Ignaz Friedman and Joseph Lhevinne. Friedman's performances of Chopin and Liszt, as well as those of his own music, are timeless—some of Lhevinne's wonderful playing on rolls is now available for all to hear on the Argo record. Carreno and Lauond are two great names that were served badly by rolls, their playing seems uneven, badly phrased, wooden and dull, yet we know from contemporary critics that this was not the case.

So these three catalogues contain a range of playing that includes the very best that pianists could offer down to some that would be best forgotten. Some of the by ways in these catalogues are interesting. To hear performances played by Aaron Copland, John Ireland, Cyril Scott, Egon Petri and Walter Gieseking give many hours of pleasure to enthusiasts of piano music.

There were hundreds of accompaniment rolls — piano concertos (either solo or orchestra parts), one piano of two-piano works, piano duets with only the bass or treble supplied, song accompaniments (Richard Strauss has recorded many of his songs), accompaniments for violin, cello, chamber music groups and choral music for schools. Conrad V. Bos

recorded some twenty minutes of Marchesi's Daily Vocal Exercises on two rolls for the benefit of students of the voice who happened to own a Duo-Art piano. Courses in the rudiments of music and ear-training were available as well as a course for beginners in piano playing on ten rolls. Accompaniments for dancing, ballet and expressive, were supervised by Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn and Alexis Kosloff and these included dancing instructions printed along the roll.

Finally, about today's attempts to record reproducing pianos on gramophone records. With one exception these have proved to be disappointing. In 1951 American Columbia issued a series of records called 'Great Masters of the Keyboard'. These were taken from Edwin Welte's personal collection of his rolls (he died in 1957), they were played on Welte's own Steinway grand (now owned by Richard Simonton of Los Angeles). This was a rushed affair, the piano had suffered bomb damage in the war, the results were lifeless and uninteresting. Even worse was an attempt to record the Duo-Art by a company calling itself 'Distinguished Recordings Inc.' of New York. They used a Steinway Duo-Art grand which had belonged to F. W. Woolworth and is now owned by a Dr Stein of New York. These were impossible records, no soft playing, no real forte and a pedestrian piano tone. The Everest records of the Duo-Art piano owned by Harold Powell of Hollywood released here last year by the World Record Club are no better—very little idea can be had from these records as to the real sound of a well-adjusted reproducing piano. Incidentally, the rolls used for these World Record releases have, so far, all been Duo-Art, the cover gives the impression that some may have been Ampico.

The outstanding exceptions in this depressing state of affairs are the Argo records of the Grotrian — Steinweg Ampico belonging to John Farmer in London. These recordings are far from the insincere commercial attempts listed above. The BBC made the original tapes for their sound archives, and the results are fine indeed. The real difficulty, it seems, is to bring together, simultaneously, the rolls, a perfectly functioning piano of the highest quality, the warmest and most resonant acoustical studio or concert hall and absolutely first-rate recording equipment and engineers. This would produce a treasurable record of this priceless material for all future generations.

Anyone who has heard a well adjusted and carefully restored reproducing piano at first hand will argue that no gramophone record of one of these instruments can capture the extraordinary presence and communication with the performer that they convey in person.