

**OBSESSIONS**

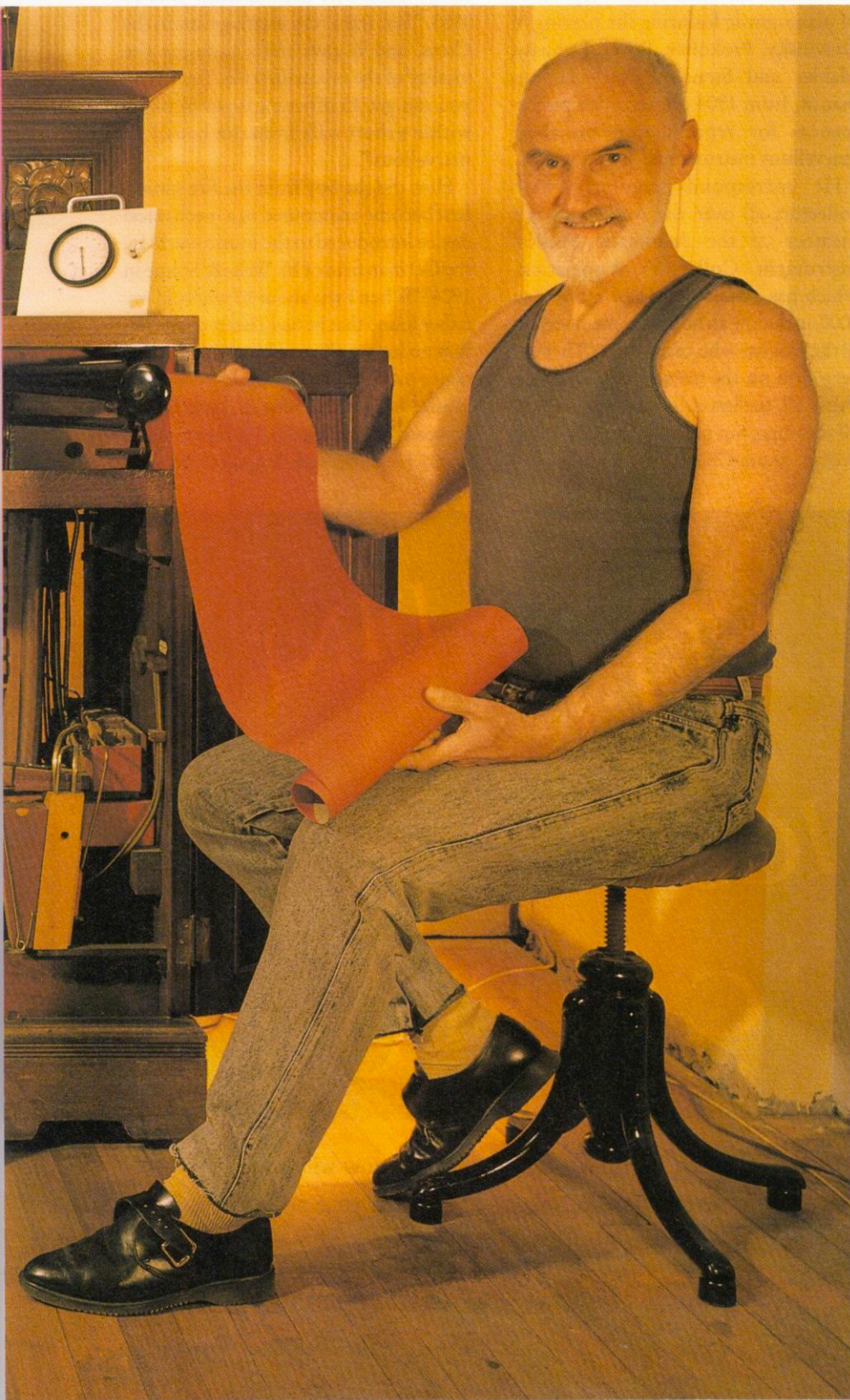
*Dennis Condon likes to hear a little tinkle on the ivory keys. And with 10 reproducing pianos, most with fingers, he is his own captive audience. JAN BALODIS inspects his melodious stash.*

# STRAUSS





# AND STRAVINSKY ON A ROLL



THE ENTRANCE TO DENNIS CONDON'S house on an inner-city street is impressively secured with an iron-grill gate and a high-tech lock. The visitor stands on the footpath to ring the bell. On a board to the left of the front door is the house name, on a black and gold nameplate: "Ampico Towers". It's more than a sign: it's a proclamation, a declaration of interest. "A little joke," Condon says later, passing it off with a shrug.

Looking extremely elegant, although wearing a wharfie's black singlet and denim jeans, Condon opens the front door and the iron gate and welcomes the visitor. An eminent music educator, he is also a collector of reproducing pianos, the mechanical luxuries for music lovers and the upwardly socially mobile of an era that predates records and tapes. The machines he collects were so exclusive in their time that their manufacturers stated that they were never to be sold "where they could be heard in public places".

We've all got memories of player pianos and piano rolls. At some noisy family party, we gathered around to sing popular songs, reading the lyrics as they unreeled on the paper rolls, changing places with the person labouring at the foot pedals as his energy flagged, clutching the front of the piano with white knuckles as we began to tire, pumping away for all we were worth. "Give me a go now," kids yelled. "I want a turn to pedal!"

Dismiss these scenes: a piano like that is a battered work van. The ones Condon collects are Rolls-Royces (with a price tag, at the time they were in production, equivalent to that of a Rolls). Only the very rich could afford the luxury of an electrically powered reproducing piano. So perfect was the fidelity of the music they produced that even the most famous

PHOTOGRAPH: KARL-PETER GOTTSCHALK



concert pianists of the first 30 years of the 20th century recorded piano rolls for replay in the homes of wealthy music lovers.

The paper piano rolls, similar in appearance to those produced for the foot-pumped piano, had the ability to record not only the notes to be played but the degree of force with which each note must be struck in order to reproduce the music exactly as the artist had originally played it in the recording session. Each work recorded had to be approved before its release by the pianist, who was sometimes the composer, too – and a world-famous one at that. Advertisements in contemporary journals offered piano rolls which would reproduce music as it was played by such distinguished artists as Saint-Saens, Busoni, Paderewski, Josef Hofmann, Cecile de Horvath, Rachmaninov, Richard Strauss and Harold Bauer.

There are two different types of reproducing mechanism. One is built into a drawer and concealed beneath the keyboard of an otherwise normal-

looking piano. The other is contained in a separate cabinet that is wheeled up to a standard instrument, with 80 felt-tipped wooden fingers which play the keyboard on command.

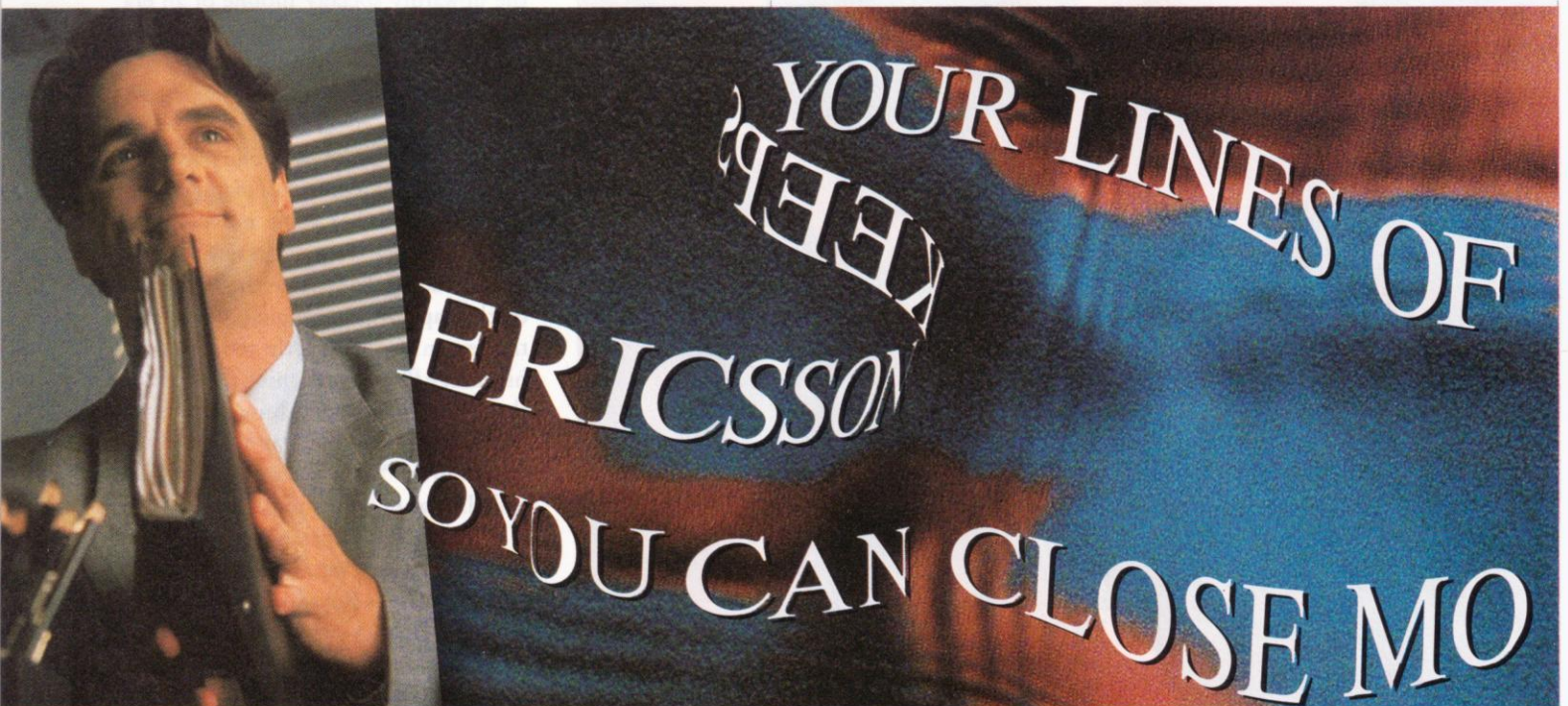
Dennis Condon's collection includes 10 pianos in different stages of refurbishment and more than 8000 piano rolls ranging from dance music of the Roaring Twenties to the main concert repertoire of piano music featuring the playing of Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Ravel, Debussy, Mahler and Strauss. "Every famous pianist, from 1904 on, recorded performances for reproduction on these marvellous instruments," Condon says.

He corresponds regularly with collectors all over the world and is a member of the Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors Association, which has a membership of more than 2000, including an honorary membership of the pianists who made rolls. "They are very thin on the ground now," he says. "After all, the last rolls were made about 60 years ago, but greats such as Rudolph Serkin, Shura Cherkassky and Claudio

Arrau are honorary members."

Condon was born in Newcastle, New South Wales, in the early 1930s. His father was a member of the fire brigade and the family moved constantly. "I've always lived in inner-city locations," he says. "We lived for years at Circular Quay where the overhead railway is now, also near the Tooth Brewery on Broadway and in the Kings Cross Fire Station from 1948 to 1953. That was a very exciting time in the Cross, and it gave me a taste for the vitality of the urban lifestyle. You know, you can get 13 different types of olives within a short walk from this house! It's marvellous!"

How did the boy from the fire station first become enamoured of a mechanical device introduced to the music world by the German firm of M. Welte & Sohne in 1904? "When I was about 15 years old my father found that he had a heart condition that no longer allowed him to pump our player piano. So, because he loved making music, he got the idea of buying one powered by electricity – a reproducing piano. He bought an Ampico, a product



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## CONDON'S COLLECTION INCLUDES 10 PIANOS AND MORE THAN 8000 PIANO ROLLS.

of the American Piano Company, which was a New World giant of the music industry. It had set out to make a reproducing piano to compete with the famous German Welte-Mignon, which had so stunned the music world.

"I was fascinated. I used to get underneath our Ampico and look at the workings. In the public library I found books that helped me to understand its functions and I set about restoring it. Where is it now? I swapped it about 30 years ago for that wonderful Ampico over there."

He begins a conducted tour of his house and the workshop across the leafy Mediterranean-style courtyard, explaining that production of these expensive instruments ceased when the Great Depression began, at the end of the 1920s. As he talks he touches the pianos in the elegantly furnished rooms, demonstrating the action of the larger pump mechanisms, cradling the little refurbished pneumatics in his hands, and offering for examination the springs and keys and repolished wooden panels in the

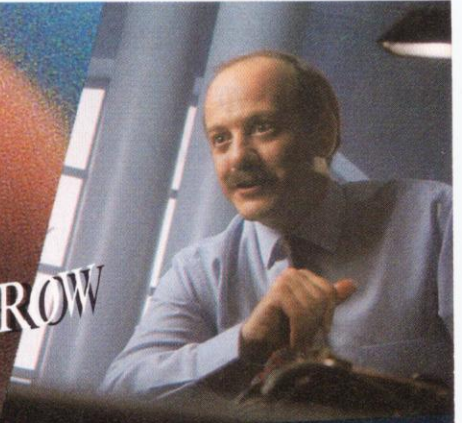
workshop. He says that he calls this his hobby, but friends describe it as an obsession. "I've kept and filed every reference to reproducing pianos, and every letter from a fellow collector, for more than 40 years!" he says.

The tour is interrupted by telephone calls, and the doorbell rings from time to time. A well-known music researcher and teacher, Condon is much in demand in his retirement. Briskly, he finalises arrangements to give a lecture, to make broadcasts on 2MBS FM, and discusses research for a book on the history of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. And the tour of the establishment continues.

The doorbell rings yet again: the ABC's Ivan Lloyd and Glen Thurgate have come to discuss the technical requirements for recording 13 programmes for ABC FM. We settle on pale grey velvet sofas in the upstairs sitting room with its five pianos, and Condon offers a demonstration of the piano that will be used in the series and the piano-playing machine that wheels up to it. He fills the room with the suave foxtrot rhythms of "Dancing In The Dark" played by the ghostly presence of Frank Milne – and by 80 mechanical fingers, housed in a highly polished fine-wood case, which have been wheeled up to the ebony-lacquered grand. We are in the world of F. Scott Fitzgerald now. This could be a gathering in a Long Island mansion after an evening at the theatre in Manhattan. It puts me in mind of men in white ties and dinner suits, women with shingled hair and fringed silk shifts, long cigarette holders, drooping eyelids. This could be 1920 as we face the music together. ■

Jan Balodis is a freelance editor and writer.

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