



VORSETZER AT THE PIANO WITH ARCHIVISTS SIMONTON (LEFT) & HEEBNER  
*Ghostly presences from a golden age.*

## RECORDINGS

### Encores from the Past

The lights in the recording studio were dimmed, and Vorsetzer, the 700-lb. pianist, stood at the keyboard of the Steinway concert grand, all 88 fingers poised over the keys. Then the mechanical wizard began to play—first a spirited Josef Hofmann performance of Mendelssohn's *Rondo Capriccioso*, then further séances with Leschetizky, Paderewski, Busoni, Mahler, Saint-Saëns, Debussy, Ravel. Guided by electric impulses from a collection of unique piano rolls, Vorsetzer's sensitive fingers produced all the notes with ghostly perfection, just as the turn-of-the-century masters had played them 50 years before. But this time, tape recorders took in every appoggiatura so that the antique treasures could be preserved in high-quality stereo recordings.

Those recordings are every bit as good

as they might have been had the masters themselves been around to play for the stereo age. They are hi-fi's first completely successful encounter with a golden age of the piano, and they come with towering endorsements from the old masters (praising the piano rolls) and from such acute modern listeners as Glenn Gould, George Szell and Leopold Stokowski (praising the records).

The original piano rolls were made through a technique perfected in 1904 by the famed German firm of M. Welte & Söhne. Special pianos were fitted with carbon rods extending downward from each key. As the keys were struck, the rods dipped into a tray of mercury, completing an electric circuit that controlled the pressure of an inked rubber wheel turning against a roll of tissue-thin paper. The wheel marked the paper faintly if the key was struck softly; fortissimos produced a wide mark because the force of the pianist's finger sank the carbon rod deeper in the mercury and intensified the current. A companion machine—the Vorsetzer—was placed at the keyboard to play back the rolls, reproducing not only the notes and their rhythmic sequence but also the personality of the original performance.\* There was none of the wheezing monotony of the standard player piano; every eccentricity of the pianist's technique was recorded with incredible accuracy.

**Beethoven & Me.** Armed with a large income and an even larger reputation, Edwin Welte, the system's inventor, had no trouble inducing all the masters of the period to come to his *Musiksaal* and contribute to his "Welte Legacy of

\* When the widow of Italian Virtuoso Ferruccio Busoni heard one of his Welte rolls being played some months after his death, the effect was so intense that she ran from the music salon screaming "Ferruccio! Ferruccio!"

Piano Treasures." He also recorded the likes of Ravel, Debussy and Mahler long before they had gained popular acceptance, tolerating Debussy's monumental ego ("There have been produced so far in this world two great musicians," Debussy once told him, "Beethoven and me."), encouraging timid players such as Edvard Grieg, whose embarrassment at the keyboard often reduced him to hopeless laughter. In the years before the vogue of the phonograph silenced his studios, Welte's legacy included performances by more than 100 pianists and composers.

The piano rolls were hidden in a Black Forest cave during World War II, and in 1948, an American enthusiast named Richard Simonton bought the rolls from the poor and aging Welte. But the first attempts to record them two years later were marred by everything from the sound of overhead airplanes to freezing temperatures that kept the piano out of tune. Further attempts since then have achieved somewhat better results, but nothing close to contemporary sound standards. Last year Simonton turned the rolls over to Walter Heebner, 46, a master of modern recording techniques. Played back on a modern Steinway in an acoustically ideal studio, and recorded by a battery of seven microphones, Welte's legacy produced an astoundingly good hearing for the late virtuosos.

**Whimsy & Butterflies.** So far, Heebner has recorded 46 Welte artists and gleaned from the rolls enough music to fill 40 LPs. He still has 60 artists unrecorded. Having despaired of distributing the records through major labels because of their inevitable involvement with discount sales, Heebner plans to sell his albums by mail order—twelve LPs a year in editions of 5,000 priced at an unvarying \$12.50 each. For openers, three LPs in a handsome package will be offered to Book-of-the-Month Club members this week at \$17.95 for monaural and \$19.95 for stereo.

Heebner is counting on musicologists and students of the piano to provide him with something of a perpetual trust fund; the records, he thinks, will never go out of date. But flawless and fascinating as they are, careful listeners may find them full of disturbing surprises. Many of the classic works are given performances that are difficult to reconcile with modern piano interpretation. The effect of changing taste and style on the music is startlingly apparent.

For all that, students of the history of piano-playing may now find answers to many of the questions that nag their conversation (But how good was Busoni?), for the sweep of genius from those halcyon days is very nearly complete. The old pianists seem far more individual and whimsical than today's players. Saint-Saëns had a touch like Sonny Liston; Olga Samaroff, born Lucie Hickenlooper in Texas and once married to Stokowski, had all the percussive power of a butterfly.