



Roll over Debussy

Ghostly composers perform on CDs recorded from antiquated piano rolls

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By SCOTT CANTRELL / Staff Writer

AUSTIN – Down a tree-shaded gravel road, in an old stone house, Béla Bartók is playing the piano. When, that is, Claude Debussy or Maurice Ravel or Enrique Granados isn't at the keys.

The composers, some of the most famous of the early 20th century, aren't there in the flesh. But they're invisible ghostly presences in Kenneth Caswell's living room, as historic piano rolls recreate their performances with uncanny vividness.

"It was the spookiest darn thing I had ever experienced," University of Texas audio archivist Karl Miller says, of first hearing Scriabin via one of Mr. Caswell's piano rolls. "Thinking about Scriabin's mysticism and everything, it was as if Scriabin's ghost were sitting in front of the piano."

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Mr. Caswell, now retired after an arts-management career that ended up at his hometown Austin Symphony Orchestra, has somewhere between 300 and 400 piano rolls stored in nooks and crannies. He plays them on two pianos with reproducing mechanisms: a 1929 Chickering grand and a 1923 Feurich-Welte upright.

He's also been recording these reconstituted performances for CD release by the Austin-based, not-for-profit Pierian Recording Society, whose president is UT's Dr. Miller. So far, the Pierian label has issued performances by composers Debussy, Ravel, Scriabin, Granados, Respighi and Alfredo Casella, and by pianists Fanny Bloomfield Zeisler and Teresa Carreño. More are in the works. The recordings are nationally distributed by Albany Music.

The performances are ear-opening, to say the least. Alexander Scriabin considerably rewrites one of his own mazurkas. Debussy plays his famous *Engulfed Cathedral* with tempo relationships different from those in the printed score.

Granados' performances capture revisions he never got around to putting into print (although they're being incorporated in a new critical edition). There's an elegant playfulness to Bartók's reading of one of his Hungarian folk-song arrangements.

Again and again, from one composer after another, one hears rhythmic freedoms all but unimaginable in our age of musical literalism. A tendency to hurry groups of short notes fairly leaps to the ear.

"Not many of them stuck to the printed page," Mr. Caswell notes with a chuckle, "particularly in the early 1900s. By the 20s, it was beginning to be less free."

Limits of writing

Musical notation tells us only so much about how a piece should sound. The rhythmic and coloristic nuances that separate distinctive performances from the routine are virtually impossible to write down. And what musician hasn't wished to hear how Bach, Mozart and Beethoven actually performed their own music?

Piano rolls and early cylinder and disc recordings can tell us quite a lot about how composers including Gabriel Fauré, Manuel de Falla, Alexander Glazunov, Gustav Mahler, Camille Saint-Saëns and Richard Strauss played and imagined their works. Early recordings open windows into late-romantic performance practices that were largely stamped out by a mid-20th-century emphasis on the score and nothing but the score.

Mr. Caswell was a University of Texas-trained geologist, a music-loving one, when he got interested in arts management. Hired as box-office manager of the Houston Symphony Orchestra, he went on to be manager of the San Antonio Symphony and Opera. Stints with the San Diego Symphony and Memphis Opera led to a 17-year-run as manager of the Austin Symphony.

"I come from a totally nonmusical family," he says in a friendly Texas drawl. "But when I was 5 or 6 years old, my great aunt used to take me down to the old Reed Music Co. here, and they had a big table full of used 78s for anywhere from 5 to 25 cents each. She would give me a dollar, and that's where it got started.

"I love good music, but I'm totally self-taught ... But I have listened all my life, and being a manager of symphonies and operas I do believe you develop an acute ear, or you wouldn't be there."

Mr. Caswell bought his first reproducing piano while on his first geology job, in New Orleans. He traded up several times before landing his current pianos.

"Several of my collector buddies have five and 10 reproducing pianos," he says, "but none of them work quite right. They don't know what to do, or they don't have time to adjust them properly. I figured I'm going to concentrate just on these two."

Piano rolls: How true?

There were primitive player pianos as early as the late 18th century. But not until 1904 did the German firm Welte introduce a mechanism that could reproduce some semblance of the recording pianist's subtleties of touch and volume. (These more nuanced playback instruments are called reproducing pianos, to differentiate them from less sophisticated player pianos.)

Welte and two competing (and incompatible) American systems, Ampico and Duo-Arte, dominated the business during its heyday, from about 1915 until 1930. The Great Depression, and the arrival of more sophisticated electrical recordings, pretty much finished off the reproducing piano industry, although today, of course, Yamaha's digital Disklavier has revived the concept.



Chris Carson / Special to DMN
Ken Caswell holds a Welte Mignon piano roll of a 1904 recording by composer Eugene D'Albert.



Chris Carson / Special to DMN
A Welte Mignon piano roll contains a 1904 recording of Franz Liszt's Nocturne, No. 3 (Love's Dream).

The greatest pianists of the early 20th century, and a number of composers, recorded rolls, often for more than one company. And they signed glowing testimonials to the accuracy of the reproductions, which certainly seemed more lifelike than murky, scratchy acoustic recordings of the period. Piano rolls also offered as much as 18 minutes' playing time, versus the 78-rpm discs' four or so.

But one couldn't always be sure that playback speeds, and thus musical tempos, were identical to the originals. With tiny leather-covered bellows moving the piano hammers, the more sophisticated reproducing pianos were also notoriously sensitive to variations in temperature and humidity. The paper of the rolls was fragile. And even when fastidiously maintained, the best reproducing pianos didn't capture the full range of tonal nuances.

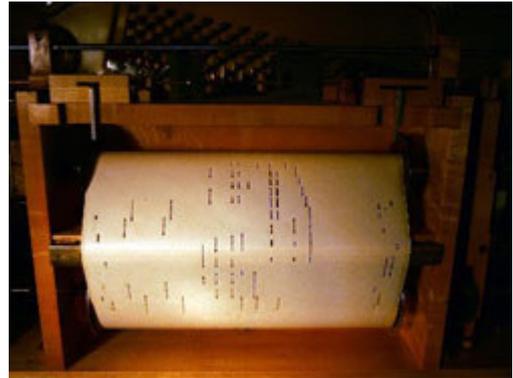
"With different climates and temperatures and humidities during the recordings, you have to know how to set the piano mechanism to suit that recording session," Mr. Caswell says. "It's not something you can put on a test roll and everything's fine."

Audio recordings from piano rolls have appeared on multiple generations of long-playing records and CDs. How accurately these represent the original performers' intentions has always been controversial.

"I'm trying to get this accurately done once and for all," Mr. Caswell says. "With the LPs, some of the speeds are right, some are wrong.

"We're coming along 100 years after some of these recordings were made. I'm pleased, though, because people listening to these recordings for the first time are beginning to listen to the playing of the artists and composers and not talk about, 'Oh, those old player pianos ...' "

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Chris Carson / Special to DMN
A piano roll is pictured on Ken Caswell's 1929 Ampico reproducing piano, housed in a Chickering piano body.

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