

THE GREAT PIANOLA WAR OF 1898 AND OTHER ANECDOTES

Adam Ramet

Many old books contain references to the world of mechanical music. I have dug out a few you may have not encountered before. The first book is the pianist Mark Hambourg's autobiography "From Piano to Forte" (Cassell 1931). I have extracted a few relevant paragraphs from the final chapter, the rest of which deals with his views on the other forms of musical reproduction.

One machine already plays the product of another. The wireless constantly broadcasts gramophone records, and musical performers already exist who only play for the machines. It is their profession to be wireless or gramophone feeders, just as there are special film actors who reserve their activities for the screen and play no part in the real theatres. Distinguished composers have begun to write works entirely for the mechanical instruments. Saint-Seans, for instance, wrote one or two compositions for the Aeolian automatic organ where he doubtless found a wider scope for new combinations of harmonies than the limitations of the hand-played instruments allowed. Stravinsky has produced works for the "Pleyela," a French mechanical piano, which are daring in conception if not harmoniously beautiful. Combinations have also been tried with a human orchestra and a mechanically played piano. I remember Nikisch conducting at a concert of this kind, where he directed the orchestra and the pianola played the solo part of a concerto. This performance took place in the Queen's Hall, and I fancy the result was adequate, but not one which took the public fancy.

Further on Hambourg further elaborates his views on reproduction of music via roll operated instruments.

I find pianolas difficult to listen to, though I appreciate the pleasure they give to enthusiasts who love the illusion that they are really playing the piano admirably on their own initiative by tramping their feet up and down. But the reason it is tantalizing for a musician to listen to a pianola for long is because of its precision, its unerring correctness. This deadly accuracy, so foreign to the frailty of mere man, imparts an atmosphere of artificiality to all music made by electrical machines. This is so much the case that some artists, when playing for them, ask to have any mistakes they happen to make during the performance left on the reproducing roll, so that the results may appear more natural. Usually, when a performer plays for recording on the perforated rolls of a pianola the procedure is for an operator to sit like a regular *Beckmesser* beside the piano, marking off on a slate any wrong note that is played. It is then altered and rectified on the finished roll. One of these official correctors confided to me that his task was often difficult when he had to erase faults in works of great technical display. He told me too about a famous pianist who was asked to perform Chopin's Study in Thirds, and doubted whether he had a sufficiently reliable finger technique to make a good performance. So he was persuaded to play only the upper notes of the Third passages, whilst the lower ones were afterwards cut into the roll by the operators who stood by. My informant told me that the piece thus recorded came out admirably on the pianola; all the laboriously difficult progressions of double notes sounded as smooth and easy as one could wish. Such an elimination of technical problems by the reproducing machines, as the one just cited (and there are others just as sweeping), has created an unnatural situation for the performer, since feats of virtuosity no longer astonish those who hear them on mechanical instruments. This is because they only see a machine playing and hardly connect the performance in their minds with the human element. So, while astounding technical agility produced on any instrument by human hands always stimulates wonder and admiration for the mastery of execution shown, such effects seem perfectly simple on the machine, for whom it is no more difficult to play one note than a thousand. This annihilation by the machines of the significance of technique is of some artistic interest in so far as it may lower the standard of artists, for whom technical proficiency is at present an essential vehicle for the presentation of every esthetic idea.

On the gramophone, mechanical perfection does not obtain in at all the same degree. I have already observed that a gramophone record once made cannot be rectified, which most artists know to their

cost. Who has not experienced the worry of a record having to be made over and over again for the sake of some unfortunate slip, and what a comfort it would be if only the operator could correct that slip on the soft wax in the way that pianola rolls are doctored, instead of having to scrap the whole thing. Perhaps when reels of film are adapted for musical recording, as it is rumoured they are going to be, it will be possible to cut out the mistakes made and to piece in the corrections.

I have met several strange mechanical instruments as well as the more usual pianolas and gramophones, none of which have, however, gained the popularity of the latter. One of these was a mechanical violin which I saw in Leipzig. It was a most ingenious instrument consisting of four fiddles and a circular bow fixed into a cabinet, whilst underneath them was fitted the recording roll. The machine tuned itself, was worked electrically, and played the most difficult violin music with perfect ease. It was however bulky and expensive, which perhaps prevented it from being an entire success. I have not yet met a mechanical 'cello or double bass, but the homely accordion exists in machine blown form, and I believe that it can play a Beethoven Symphony or a Wagner Overture with the utmost gusto. I am now told that even mechanical mouth-organs have arrived on the market. I cannot quite figure out how these last are worked, but I feel sure that they will enlarge the musical vision of the schoolroom.

In a different part of the book is a comical anecdote on Bernard Stavenhagen, one of Liszt's pupils. Stavenhagen made a very small number of piano rolls (unsurprising since he died in 1914) and also a gramophone recording, the latter of which a copy has never been located to my knowledge. Amongst the rolls is a recording made for Welte's Mignon of a piece by Liszt but curiously marked as being played as he remembered Liszt (his teacher) playing the work. I have a copy of that roll and it is a highly idiosyncratic performance utterly unlike any other rendition you will hear whether on older recordings or indeed from our present era. In places the rhythms are far more complex in a manner sheet music could never convey and there are parts that deviate slightly from the published score. It is always easy to be sceptical a century after the recording was made however after I read the anecdote I have formed an opinion that the roll performance is almost certainly as it says on the label i.e. the only live recording of Liszt's true playing style of this piece. My opinion is upon the bases that the observation of Stavenhagen's methodology are non-autobiographical and secondly when the recording was made is 1904 there were still many people living who remembered how Liszt played and there is no contemporary report of Stavenhagen's playing style being condemned as spurious. Anyway, read on and form your own opinion!



Stavenhagen, also a Liszt disciple, attained a considerable reputation in Germany but never really penetrated this side of the Channel, though he did play once or twice in London. He was an artist who limited himself to playing one or two works only, and took pride in the perfection of what he did perform rather than in an extensive selection. One evening in the artists' room after a concert where Stavenhagen played, and had had a rousing success, a lady came in and asked him admiringly to write a line or two of music in her autograph album. "Pray, Master," she said, "just write something short." Stavenhagen turned to Moritz Rosenthal who was standing near by and said: "Well, Moritz, what shall I write which is short and complete?" Rosenthal, who had a caustic wit and could never forgo a clever jest even at the expense of a friend, answered smoothly: "Why not write your repertoire?"

Next we turn to "My Reminiscences" ; Luigi Arditi's 1896 autobiography. He is remembered today only as the writer of the "Il Bacio" waltz. Though forgotten, Arditi was one of the leading lights of music in the Victorian era. He was conductor of the opera house at Covent Garden and also the favourite accompanist for Adelina Patti, probably the greatest operatic vocalist of her generation. The popularity of "Il Bacio Waltz" is simple. Arditi wrote it for Patti as a virtuoso vocal number and it became an

enduring hit - latterly in an instrumental format. Patti amassed a fortune and at her residence at Craig-Y-Nos Castle (complete with private theatre) championed all the latest technological innovations of the age including electric light and a giant Style 10 Welte Orchestrion. It is fortunate then that the only mechanical music anecdote in the entire book is about the orchestrion.

On my return to London, in 1886, I signed a contract to accompany Henry Abbey's Operatic Troupe as conductor, while in August of that year Virginia [Arditi's wife] and I paid our first visit to Craig-y-nos Castle, Adelina Patti's Welsh home. This is how Virginia recorded our arrival and subsequent short stay there in her diary:-

"25th of August.-Left Paddington Station at 10.30, and arrived at Craig-y-nos at 7-30. Adelina and Nicolini received us with open arms. We were too tired to dress, so we adjourned to a perfect dinner, served in a magnificent conservatory (a sort of hall of enchantment, illuminated by myriads of electric fairy lights).

"After dinner we played billiards, and heard the wonderful organ which hails from Switzerland, and gives a rendering of fifty or more operas, to say nothing of concerted pieces and other music...

" I have no idea how many *parures* of brilliants, rubies, sapphire, pearls, emeralds, and turquoises, etc., the Diva possesses, for night after night she appears before us adorned by new splendours...

"We pass our days in walking, driving, eating, and sleeping; no music save the organ, yet always the same charming morning whiling away our time in this Paradise. . . . We went to the Hut yesterday in the hopes of seeing some salmon caught, but Nicolini was unsuccessful, and attributes his failure to the fact that it has not rained enough lately.

" Luigi and I are enchanted with the Castle. It would take one quite a fortnight to visit each room and its treasures, for the Diva's store of mementos of celebrities is inexhaustible. We have, however, seen most of her decorations, gifts, and jewellery, and her collection is quite unique..."



The next excerpt is from "My Musical Life and Recollections", the autobiography of Jules Rivière. He was a prolific composer conductor and arranger whose "Spring Gentle Spring" from "Babil et Bijou" was a very enduring hit at one time. The collaborative spectacular that was "Babil et Bijou" ran at Covent Garden for fully eight months in 1872. Rivière writes:

Spring! Gentle Spring! became so popular everywhere, that when it got on all the street organs, not a few among my friends declared that they should owe me an eternal grudge for having produced it.

Though Rivière's experiences pre-date the great explosion of mechanical music in the 1890s he did have one further close encounter of the Gavioli kind in the 1880s....



Some years later I paid another visit to Edinburgh, when another unusual experience occurred.....But on arriving at the same Waverley Market I was not a little surprised to find that my concerts were to be supplemented by a number of variety shows. I awaited events, and at seven o'clock I began as usual with *God Save the Queen*, which was played to a crowded house, all the reserved seats even being occupied. The band then played the march from *Le Prophète*, which was followed by the *Zampa* overture. So far well, but when the clarinette player began his solo this was drowned by the noise of a powerful steam organ belonging to a round-about at the other end of the building, that was thundering forth Coborn's popular ditty, "Two Lovely Black Eyes." This sudden interruption made the visitors jump up in their seats to see where the noise came from, and there was nothing left for me but to stop the band and sit down. Sending for the manager, I explained to him that a band of trained musicians could not play to such an accompaniment as was then going on,

and it was at once arranged that, during my concerts for an hour in the afternoon and an hour in the evening, all the other entertainments should be suspended. I never afterwards heard “Two Lovely Black Eyes” played anywhere, even on street organs, without recalling that awful din at the Waverley Market.

To conclude let us again return to Mark Hambourg’s book where we find the future first Mrs Ziegfeld, Anna Held, battling the maestro in the Great Pianola War of 1898:

I stayed in New York at the Hotel Martin, kept by a Frenchman who afterwards opened the well-known Café Martin, which was for some years one of the best restaurants in the city. Jabez Martin was a remarkable caterer, and in the days of his hotel in 1898 he used to produce a first-rate dinner for one dollar twenty-five cents; people would stand in queues to try and get into the hotel for this excellent meal. I could not help reflecting sadly that I saw no such queues for our good concert fare. One of my fellow guests in the Hotel Martin, was Anna Held, the musical comedy actress, reputed to have the finest bare back in the world. She complained to the manager that I started practising too early in the morning, and disturbed her slumbers. As her habit was to stay up all night giving parties and dancing in her apartment which certainly disturbed me, I was indignant at her daring to complain of my noise. But the creature hired a pianola and made it play exactly the same pieces of music that I was working at, and with devilish ingenuity she would put on this wretched instrument whenever I started to practice.



This nearly drove me distracted, and I was perforce obliged to stop playing. Eventually, however, through the good offices of Mr. Martin, we made a truce with each other, and I agreed not to start so early and she not to remain so late.

Each of the books referred to here is worth the effort searching for. Hambourg’s views on the wireless and the gramophone are equally insightful. His anecdotes and musical reminiscences I highly recommend to those interested in the classical pianists of reproducing piano era. Arditi’s book is so exceptionally readable in bringing the Victorian operatic and concert scene to life that I began to hate Mr Edison for not having invented his phonograph fifty years earlier. Rivière has plenty to offer also and spent many years of his career in France. In his book you will find anecdotes about the virtuoso cornetists Kœnig (composer of the “Post Horn Galop”) and Arban (whose “Cornet Method” is still a standard work on the subject to this day) and even Luigini (only known now for the suite from his “Ballet Egyptian”). Each has a fascinating early-years life story to tell; Hambourg in tsarist Russia, Arditi’s first overseas concert tour at the age of 23 travelling to Havana only to find the theatre destroyed by a recent cyclone and finally Rivière’s horrific personal experiences of the Napoleonic wars and the revolution of 1830.