



Welte-Mignon Piano Rolls • 2

DDD

8.110678

R. STRAUSS • GRIEG • CHOPIN • WEBER

Piano rolls 1905-1915 recorded on a restored Steinway-Welte performed by

R. Strauss • Grieg • Paderewski • Popper



Welte-Mignon Piano Rolls, Vol. 2

As must be expected of a story that begins in Germany before one war and ends after another, this is a tale of triumph and tragedy, of glory and despair. The contraption known as the Welte-Mignon Reproducing Piano was a product of man's better nature because it brought the music of great pianists and composers into elegant homes, but after many years of success, the sales declined, production ceased, and its inventors watched helplessly as another side of man's nature, with a different set of priorities, reduced the dream to ashes, leaving only scattered remnants to be cherished by a few fortunate collectors.

A rediscovery of the Welte Legacy occurred shortly after the end of World War II. Richard C. Simonton (my father) wrote to Edwin Welte in an effort to locate Welte music rolls for the pipe organ in his residence. Welte replied that he had saved only about sixteen organ rolls, which he would gladly exchange for food. His letter also mentioned that he and former partner Karl Bockisch had lost nearly everything in the war, yet had managed to hide a quantity of piano rolls in a barn in the Black Forest. (My mother recalls finding bits of straw in the boxes when the rolls were later opened for playing.)

The story that Edwin Welte told of the development of the piano recording system, the names of the legendary pianists and composers, the greatest of that Golden Age, the subsequent events that nearly obliterated any memory of the artistic heights attained, all convinced my father that here was an opportunity to do something significant for posterity and perhaps earn some money at the same time. By late 1948 he was in Freiburg working with Welte and Bockisch (co-inventors of the system), playing the master rolls on a Steinway-Welte piano belonging to Bockisch, and recording the sound onto a recently-developed tape recorder, with both types of machines, old technology and new, being extremely rare. The tapes from those

sessions were released as long-playing records by Columbia in 1950 and sold well.

The Welte-Mignon Reproducing Piano evolved from a mechanical music machine business that began in 1832 as M. Welte & Soehne. Impractical pinned cylinders triggered the musical notes of their large Orchestrions (self-playing organs), which later led to the development of perforated paper music rolls. The idea was less successfully adapted to pianos because merely playing the notes was hardly sufficient. The Welte "player piano" would need a realistic range of expression. It must capture the artistic temperament of the performer. The concept of recording full dynamics and delicate nuances from a guest pianist and then reproducing them on an instrument that could be manufactured must have seemed overwhelming at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was the realm of pure invention. Parts for the mechanisms could not be found in local hardware stores. Fortunately, the Welte factory was equal to the challenge, and so, presumably undaunted, Welte and Bockisch persevered, and by 1904 their product was ready for market.

The Welte achievement is put into perspective by comparing it against other musical marvels of the day. The Edison Diamond Disc Phonograph (1912 to 1929), as an example, was one of the more advanced machines for the acoustic reproduction of analog audio waveforms. Its advertising slogan, "Comparison with the living artist reveals no difference", was widely accepted, yet did not take into account the limited bandwidth and dynamic range (not to mention surface noise) that were apparent to anyone possessing better ears than Edison's. The Welte-Mignon, on the other hand, was a digital recording medium, with little theoretical generation loss, breath-taking dynamics, and unlimited frequency response. The complexity of the Welte player was phenomenal too, compared to other devices of its time. It was also much more expensive, which restricted

the market to wealthier clients throughout Europe, with limited sales in the United States until a somewhat scaled-down version appeared.

Eventually, other types of so-called Reproducing Pianos came along, although it is generally conceded that none surpassed the Welte in terms of musical perfection, nor in artists and repertoire. Aside from that, there is little agreement today about how the recording system worked and how accurate it really was. It is known that a carbon rod beneath each key on the recording piano dipped into a trough of mercury to complete an electric circuit as the pianist struck the note. The electrical impulses compelled inked rollers to mark a blank paper roll with the individual notes being played, along with encoded indications of striking force and velocity. The inked roll could be read electrically and played back for the artist's approval, and was then translated manually to produce the perforated "Master Roll," from which copies were replicated for sale.

Specific details of the process were kept secret and remain so (taken to the grave, in other words), which has led to wild speculation and heated arguments among experts in the field of mechanical music machines as to what level of interpretation was required by Welte editors to produce the master rolls and how much subtle accuracy the recording or reproducing machines were capable of. Perhaps the important point is that the Welte-Mignon reproducing mechanisms, whether built into a piano or pushed up to the keyboard as an attachment, are just that. They are machines. The degree to which the soul of the performing artist shines through can only be estimated. If the music of the piano when played by this complex apparatus can stir the emotions without offending the intellect, then the Welte-Mignon will have achieved its purpose.

They were, of course, not advertised as machines, but as musical instruments capable of perfect reproduction. Testimonials by the artists lavishly praised the Welte system as an opportunity for

immortality. Posterity was to be served by it. Their talent and genius would live for ever, as recorded by the Welte-Mignon. Edwin Welte and Karl Bockisch sought to preserve immortal performances against the day they would otherwise be lost to history.

Whether the rolls were recorded by composers still famous today or pianists forgotten long ago, the Welte-Mignon provides a holographic glimpse of their skill, their artistry, and in particular, their style. The rolls reflect a more flamboyant and exuberant style of playing (less sterile?) than is considered acceptable today. They bring to life an age when pianists were superstars and knew how to fill a hall with music and lift an audience out of its seats with virtuosity and individuality. Some in fact, such as Paderewski, demonstrated that more eccentricity of style was better than less, at least as far as popularity was concerned. The Welte library provides the means to experience performance details that mere historical accounts could never convey.

In order to derive full benefit from the Welte-Mignon reproducing piano mechanism, one must possess an instrument in excellent condition and retain the services of a factory-trained technician to keep it "tweaked" for maximum performance. Of course, there is no longer any first-generation knowledge of how to adjust it, and even if there were, attempts at perfection would be thwarted by the brittle conditions and shrinkage of the paper rolls as they approach one hundred years of age. Few reproducing mechanisms survive and many rolls cannot be subjected to the stresses of being played. New technologies allow scanning of the rolls to extract the digital data for preservation, although piano-playing devices are not being built to reproduce them. Modern electric player actions lack the speed, force, and operating range of the pneumatic actuators used by the Welte-Mignon, both for striking the notes and controlling the dynamics.

The future of the Welte Legacy rests in the hands of curators and collectors. Production ceased in 1932 and virtually all of the archival material fell victim to impending horrors. The Welte factory in Freiburg was converted to the production of implements of war and became a target of Allied bombing. When my father picked through the rubble with Edwin Welte in 1948, he found carbon rods that might have been part of the recording piano. Only the hidden master rolls had escaped the destruction of the factory. Ironically, the Steinway-Welte piano that Bockisch and Welte found for my father in 1952, the one used in making this CD, is said to have belonged to Hitler. Legend claims that it was away being serviced at the end of the war, and was thus spared the same fate as its owner. (What an

endorsement that would have made—Hitler relaxing to the sounds of glorious piano music after a busy day plundering Europe!)

Two hundred of Edwin Welte's post-war letters gave vent to equal concerns for a secure future and upset over the past and present. They pondered current events that would certainly lead to World War III, but also expressed profound gratitude for parcels of even the most basic food and clothing items from the United States with remarks such as, "My wife held the bag of flour in her arms like a baby". It was a sign of better times by 1951 when Karl Bockisch wrote, "Please do not send any more macaroni and cheese".

Richard Simonton, Jr.

The Naxos historical label aims to make available the greatest recordings in the history of recorded music, in the best and truest sound that contemporary technology can provide. To achieve this aim, Naxos has engaged a number of respected restorers who have the dedication, skill and experience to produce restorations that have set new standards in the field of historical recordings.

| | |
|---|---------------------------|
| Composer: CHOPIN | Pianist: |
| ① Etude in G flat major (Black Keys), Op. 10, No. 5 | Tosta di Benici |
| MENDELSSOHN | |
| ② Rondo Capriccioso in E major, Op. 14 | Josef Hofmann |
| CHOPIN | |
| ③ Nocturne No. 5 in F sharp minor, Op. 15, No. 2 | Camille Saint-Saëns |
| CHOPIN | |
| ④ Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor, Op. 31, No. 2 | Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler |
| MOSZKOWSKI | |
| ⑤ Walzer, Op. 17, No. 3 | Lillian Seckendorf Popper |
| R. STRAUSS | |
| ⑥ Dance of the Seven Veils (from <i>Salome</i>) | Richard Strauss |
| WEBER | |
| ⑦ Rondo Brillante in E flat major, Op. 62 | Raoul Pugno |
| CHOPIN | |
| ⑧ Polonaise in A flat major, Op. 53 | Ignacy J. Paderewski |
| LISZT | |
| ⑨ Third Grand Concert Etude in D flat major | Frederic Lamond |
| GRIEG | |
| ⑩ Butterfly, Op. 43, No. 1 | Edward Grieg |
| CHOPIN | |
| ⑪ Berceuse | Gertrude Peppercorn |
| LISZT (With Cadenza by Prof. H. Vetter) | |
| ⑫ Second Hungarian Rhapsody | Johanna Lohr |

Recorded: Private Home, Simi Valley, California, 5th-19th August 2000
 Producer and Engineer: Richard Simonton, Jr.

| Date: | Location: | Roll No: | |
|---------------|------------------|-----------------|-------|
| 1912 | Freiburg | 2621 | 1:52 |
| Unknown | Freiburg | 3031 | 6:32 |
| 13th Dec 1905 | Leipzig | 807 | 2:51 |
| 6th Aug 1908 | Freiburg | 1464 | 10:31 |
| c.1915 | Poughkeepsie | 3696 | 4:01 |
| 16/02/1906 | Leipzig | 1183 | 8:52 |
| 6/03/1907 | Freiburg | 1311 | 4:58 |
| 27/02/1906 | Leipzig | 1256 | 6:13 |
| 27/11/1905 | Leipzig | 569 | 5:24 |
| 17/04/1906 | Leipzig | 1275 | 2:04 |
| 1909 | London | 1667 | 4:52 |
| 1912 | Unknown | 2703 | 11:33 |

8.110678

WELTE-MIGNON PIANO ROLLS • 2

NAXOS Historical



8.110678

DDD

Welte-Mignon Piano Rolls

Volume 2

Piano rolls 1905-c.1915 recorded on a restored Steinway-Welte

Playing
Time
69:42

NAXOS Historical

WELTE-MIGNON PIANO ROLLS • 2

8.110678

All rights in this sound recording, artwork, texts and translations reserved. Unauthorised public performance, broadcasting and copying of this compact disc prohibited. © 2004 & © 2004 Naxos Rights International Ltd. Distributed by: Naxos of America Inc., 416 Mary Lindsay Polk Drive, (Suite 509) Franklin, Tennessee, 37067, USA.

- 1 **CHOPIN:** Etude in G flat major, Op. 10 (Black Keys) (Tosta di Benici)
- 2 **MEYERBEER:** Rondo Capriccioso in E Major, Op. 14 (Josef Hofmann)
- 3 **CHOPIN:** Nocturne No. 5 in F sharp minor, Op. 15, No. 2 (Camille Saint-Saens)
- 4 **CHOPIN:** Scherzo in B flat minor, Op. 31, No. 2 (Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler)
- 5 **MOSZKOWSKI:** Walzer, Op. 17, No. 3 (Lillian Seckendorf Popper)
- 6 **R. STRAUSS:** Dance of the Seven Veils from the opera 'Salome' (Richard Strauss)
- 7 **WEBER:** Rondo Brillante in E flat major, Op. 62 (Raoul Pugno)
- 8 **CHOPIN:** Polonaise in A flat major, Op. 53 (Ignacy J. Paderewski)
- 9 **LISZT:** Third Grand Concert Etude in D flat major (Frederic Lamond)
- 10 **GRIEG:** Butterfly, Op. 43, No. 1 (Edward Grieg)
- 11 **CHOPIN:** Berceuse (Gertrude Peppercorn)
- 12 **LISZT:** Second Hungarian Rhapsody (with Cadenz by Prof. H. Vetter) (Johanna Lohr)

The original German Welte-Mignon reproducing piano system offered an alternative to the primitive acoustic recordings of the early decades of the last century. On this recording these immortal performances are brought to life freshly played on a restored Steinway-Welte Reproducing Piano, passed on to the family of this recording's producer by the inventors of the process in 1952. More than just encoding the notes, Welte-Mignon piano rolls captured delicate detail and breathtaking dynamics, revealing the individual styles and unique interpretations not only of pianists but composers performing their own works, such as Richard Strauss and his famous *Dance of the Seven Veils*.

MADE IN
CANADA

05537



Producer and Engineer: Richard Simonton, Jr.
Recorded on a restored Steinway-Welte Reproducing Piano
from 5th-19th August 2000

www.naxos.com

Cover Image: Ignacy Paderewski recording for the Welte
(Private Collection)

