



Bob Berkman, QRS music director and Buffalo office manager, explains the operation of the piano attached to the perforating machine that makes the master piano roll that other machines would then duplicate.

Dennis C. Enser/Buffalo News

# The day the music died

## QRS has ended production of player-piano rolls

BY MARK SOMMER

NEWS STAFF REPORTER

The remark scribbled at the end of the production sheet said simply, "End of era."

It was written shortly after the last piano roll came off the assembly line at QRS Music Technologies, 1026 Niagara St., at noon Wednesday.

The halt in production comes 108 years after the company was founded in Chicago, and 42 years since it moved to Buffalo. Rolls used in player pianos reached their peak in popularity in the early 20th century, when a roll of paper was able to reproduce music through perforations signifying notes played on the piano.

The company is now a leading manufacturer of digitized and computerized player-piano technology that runs on CDs.

"The roll market has continued to decline, which is no surprise," said Bob Berkman, the company's music director and manager of the Buffalo office. "It no longer is, nor has it been for some time, the central part of our business."

"We're still doing what we always did, which is to provide software for



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Kevin Lee, a shipping clerk at QRS Music Technologies, fills an order from stock on hand.

pianos that play themselves. It's just the technology that has changed. But I would be lying to say [the halting of production] doesn't sadden me."

Bill Chapman, membership secretary of the Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association, expressed disappointment at hearing that production of piano rolls had stopped.

"QRS has greatly facilitated getting new rolls and new music, and it's going to be very sad and a great loss that they are not able to sustain their operation," Chapman said.

Until Thursday, QRS was the only

continuously operating mass producer of piano rolls in the world. The only other company, in Australia, stopped earlier this decade. Sales dropped about 80 percent from 15 years ago to around 50,000 annually, Berkman estimated.

Five of the 10 employees in Buffalo have been laid off because of the piano roll shutdown. The remaining employees will produce all the music for its high-tech Pianomation system for now.

But that operation ultimately will be absorbed into QRS's Seneca, Pa., plant.

The piano-roll manufacturing equipment also is being sent there.

Berkman said the company eventually hopes to resume production in Seneca, Pa. The piano rolls were at full production in 2008, building up a stockpile of one to two years, he said.

"Production shouldn't be interrupted in any huge way. No one wants to see an end to it, and I think the numbers are favorable for resuming production," Berkman said.

However, QRS stopped making player pianos earlier this decade. The company had bought the sole manufacturer of player pianos, Classic Player Piano, in 1993 with the express purpose of providing a continuing source of pianos to play its rolls.

Berkman said reassembling the

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piano roll factory elsewhere will be difficult.

One machine dates back to the 1880s when it was used to make shoes, and for the past 100 years has made the tabs with brass eyelets used to hook the roll into a piano.

There are also aging machines to perforate and punch the holes, to cut the stencils to print the lyrics, to spool the rolls and to glue the roll boxes together.

"There are so many facets of it. The perforating machines are old and cantankerous, and they're one star in a constellation of machines that all have to be functioning," Berkman said.

The company's fortunes in recent years have been tied to Pianomation, the digitized player-piano system that can be retrofitted on most acoustic pianos. QRS also pre-installs the system on some of its own Story and Clark grand pianos.

The Pianomation systems sell for between \$6,000 and \$8,000, not including the piano.

"After a home and car, pianos might be the next big purchase a family would contemplate," Berkman said. "But grand pianos are still regarded as an elegant piece of furniture, and if you're part of contemporary culture, you want it to have all the bells and whistles it can possibly have."

The company also makes the "Virtuoso Violin," which plays by itself and in tandem with the piano.

QRS dates back to 1900. Melville Clark, a Chicago piano designer and inventor, created a subsidiary of the Melville Clark Piano Co. based on the 88-note standard piano roll he developed.

The company changed names and hands several times — even locating for a time in New York City — before Ramsi Tick, manager of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, bought it in 1966. Richard A. Dolan, the current chairman of the board, bought QRS in 1987.

The QRS Marking Piano, a boxlike device Clark invented in 1912 that enabled a master roll

to be recorded of a live performance, was designated a National Historical Engineering Landmark by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers in 1992. The original machine is under consideration for acquisition by the Smithsonian Institution, Berkman said.

The last new-issue piano roll that went off the assembly line Dec. 31 was the company's 11,060th. The song was "Spring is Here," by Rodgers and Hart, recorded by Buffalo-based pianist Michael T. Jones.

"The last roll goes against the grain," Berkman said, since the company had been mostly making pop songs. "We looked through our list [of songs] and said, 'There's a great American song we had never issued.'"

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## Lottery Picks / Winning numbers for Friday

|                             |     |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| <b>N.Y. Evening Number:</b> | 267 |
| <b>Lucky Sum:</b>           | 15  |
| <b>N.Y. Midday Number:</b>  | 434 |
| <b>Lucky Sum:</b>           | 11  |

|                          |      |
|--------------------------|------|
| <b>Win Four Evening:</b> | 3156 |
| <b>Lucky Sum:</b>        | 15   |
| <b>Win Four Midday:</b>  | 8724 |
| <b>Lucky Sum:</b>        | 21   |

**Take Five:** 15 27 29 33 36

### Pick 10:

2 14 21 24 25 27 28 29 32 37  
38 39 50 54 57 58 62 75 77 80

|                       |               |
|-----------------------|---------------|
| <b>Mega Millions:</b> | 2 11 19 21 34 |
| <b>Mega Ball:</b>     | 38            |

|                              |     |
|------------------------------|-----|
| <b>Penn. Evening Number:</b> | 046 |
| <b>Penn. Midday Number:</b>  | 162 |

|                       |      |
|-----------------------|------|
| <b>Big 4 Evening:</b> | 1805 |
| <b>Big 4 Midday:</b>  | 8923 |

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