

The Violin-Playing Machines

Hupfeld Phonoliszt-Violina Mills Violano-Virtuoso

A Study and Appreciation



Q. David Bowers

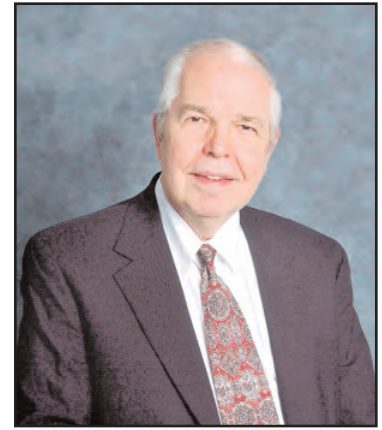
Foreword and Technical Editing

Arthur A. Reblitz

Published by the Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association (AMICA)

Q. David Bowers

Q. David Bowers has collected, studied, and enjoyed automatic musical instruments, beginning in 1960. In the intervening years he has written several books on the subject, including *A Guide Book of Automatic Musical Instruments* (1966), *Put Another Nickel In* (1968), *Encyclopedia of Automatic Musical Instruments* (1971), and *Treasures of Mechanical Music* (co-authored with Arthur A. Reblitz, 1981). He has contributed many articles to the journals of the Musical Box Society International and AMICA (Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association), and is one of just four recipients of the Musical Box Society International's Lifetime Service Award. The author, whose main business over the years has been as a dealer in rare coins, has traveled extensively through America and Europe seeking information relating to automatic musical instruments. At present he is creating several new books relating to automatic musical instruments.



From the 1960s to the 1980s he was a partner in Hathaway & Bowers, Inc. (with Terry Hathaway), American International Galleries, Inc. (with Bonnie Tekstra), and the Mekanisk Musik Museum A/S (Copenhagen, with Claes O. Friberg). These companies were major suppliers and advisors to many of the finest private and museum collections ever formed, including those of Michael Ames, Donald D. Barr, Bellm's Cars and Music of Yesterday, Alan Bies, British Piano Museum, Arthur "Bud" Bronson, Jens Carlson, Dr. George and Susie Coade, Jerry Cohen, Deutsches Musikautomatenmuseum Bruchsal, Disneyland and Walt Disney World, Klaus Fischer, Robert Gilson, Kenneth Goldman, Murtoth Guinness, Roy Haning and Neal White, Judge Roy O. Hofheinz (Astroworld), Knott's Berry Farm, Jim and Sherrie Krughoff, Claude P. Marchal, Marino Marini, Hayes McClaran, Bob and Paul Milhous, Dr. Robert Miller, J.B. Nethercutt (San Sylmar museum), Sam's Town (Sam Gordon, Shingle Springs, California), Jasper Sanfilippo, Tim Trager, Van Speelklok tot Pierement Museum (Utrecht; name changed to Museum Speelklok in 2010), Heinrich Weiss-Stauffacher, Siegfried Wendel, and many more.

A 1960 graduate of the Pennsylvania State University, he is a recipient of the Pennsylvania State University College of Business Administration's Alumni Achievement Award (1976), a fellow of the American Antiquarian Association, the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the American Numismatic Society, and is a trustee of the New Hampshire Historical Society.

Arthur A. Reblitz

Arthur A. Reblitz, a 1968 graduate of the University of Illinois, has studied automatic musical instruments and their music all his life. He and his shop, Reblitz Restorations Inc., have restored hundreds of instruments for well-known private and public collections and commercial owners since 1964.

A professionally-trained musician, his music arrangements for automatic instruments have appeared in Ringling Bros., Barnum & Bailey Circus; Ted Bowers' Japanese tour of the vaudeville show *Whatever Happened to 1910?*; Knott's Berry Farm; the Radio City Music Hall production *Manhattan Showboat*; the Paramount motion picture *Reds*; the Tournament of Roses Parade; the Coca-Cola Centennial Parade; advertising for McDonald's and Anheuser Busch; Hershey Park, Pennsylvania; the syndicated TV show "The Gilmore Girls"; the entire music library for the Ramey Banjo-Orchestra; and many others.



His major books include *Piano Servicing, Tuning & Rebuilding* (1976; 2nd edition 1992); *Treasures of Mechanical Music* (with Q. David Bowers, 1981), *The Mills Violano-Virtuoso* (with Michael L. Kitner, 1984), *Player Piano Servicing and Rebuilding* (1985), and *The Golden Age of Automatic Musical Instruments* (2001), together with numerous articles and other publications. He is the recipient of the 1982 Literary Award of the Musical Box Society International, and the 1993 and 2004 Leo Ornstein Award of the Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association

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Patent-Verkäufe.

Unterzeichnete Firma beabsichtigt, ihre Patente, soweit solche die selbsttätig mechanisch arbeitende Geige betreffen, zu verkaufen. Interessenten ist Gelegenheit gegeben, die bezüglichen Patente einzeln oder zusammen zu erwerben. Dieselben erstrecken sich auf folgende Länder: Deutschland (2 Patente), Frankreich, Holland, Österreich, Ungarn, Italien, Nordamerika, England, Schweden, Norwegen, Dänemark, Schweiz und Belgien.

Hegeler & Ehlers patentierte selbsttätige Geige

hat schätzenswerte Vorzüge, bestehend in billigen Herstellungskosten, durchaus zuverlässiger Funktion, vielseitiger Verwendbarkeit, guter Stimmhaltung und einfacher Bedienung.

Dieselbe bildet für Orchester- und Musikwerksbauwerken gewissermaßen das Ideal auf dem Gebiete der Erfindungen und kann als vorzügliche Dividendenquelle für größere Fabrikations- und Handelsgesellschaften berechnet werden.

Unterzeichnete entschieden sich nur aus dem Grunde zum Verkauf, weil diese Erfindung, die ein Produkt langjähriger Experimentierens ist, in einem Spezialgeschäft besser ausgestellt werden kann und der Öffentlichkeit in der Mäntel einer Violoncellofabrik geht, ferner Oldenburg sich durch seine geographische Lage als Fabrikationsplatz für denselben wenig eignet.

Der Preis für die gesamten Patente ist auf 180.000 Mk. inkl. sämtlicher vorhandenen Muster angesetzt, für einzelne Patente je nachdem, auf welches Land reticliert wird.

Interessenten finden Muster in unserer Oldenburger Fabrikmappe, demselbst liegt auch eine große Anzahl von Aufträgen von solchen Firmen, die sich um den Vertrieb unserer Geigenpianos bewachen. Diese werden gewöhnlich Käufern der Patente mit zugehängt. Alles Nähere durch

Hegeler & Ehlers,

Größherz. Oldenb. Hofflieferanten, Oldenburg i. Gr.

1909 the firm advertised the patent for sale for 180,000 Marks, including accessories.

Hegeler & Ehlers
Geigenpiano for sale.

(*Zeitschrift für Instrumentenbau*,
March 11, 1909)



The Violinovo with the case open.



The only known Popper Violinovo is on display at Siegfried's Mechanisches Musikkabinett in Rudesheim, Germany. This uses a real violin mounted horizontally above the keyboard.



Detail showing the violin.

Popper & Co., of Leipzig, publicized the Animochoord in 1909 ("with natural horse-hair bow") and the Violinovo for a short time in 1930 and 1931, but neither was commercially successful. The Violinovo had two active strings activated by a single bow, accompanied by a piano and percussion. Despite any merits it may have had, the Violinovo was too late in the marketplace, as there was little commercial interest in pneumatic instruments at that time, because em-



**Interior view of the Hupfeld Phonoliszt-Violina Model A
in the Sanfilippo collection.
(*The Golden Age of Automatic Musical Instruments*)**



This Model B Hupfeld Phonoliszt-Violina in the Cusik Collection traces its pedigree to Ernst Böcker who imported it circa 1911-1912. (*The Golden Age of Automatic Musical Instruments*)



For the Home

First it was our intention to present these instruments to the musical profession for use in public recitals, concerts, operas, etc., but on account of the widespread demand among well-to-do music lovers for such instruments for their homes we decided to supply this need first.

To the hostess, the Violano-Virtuoso, the Viol-Cello or the Viol-Xylophone gives a delightful, unending source of entertainment for her guests. She can arrange a musical program suitable for any occasion and know that it will please the most critical of the company.

How could an evening or a dinner-party be made more enjoyable than by the works of the master composers, or by the latest opera selections, rendered with all the skill of the most noted concert artists?

One of these instruments as you have seen, is always ready to give a greater variety of selections than any musician can offer because the repertoire of any player is limited, while that of this instrument is as great as the number of music rolls provided for it.

And aside from its value for the entertainment of friends such an instrument has an important place in the family circle alone. A home without good music is without one of the real necessities of modern life. There is no argument to be made on that point. It is a fact beyond discussion.

In choosing an instrument for your home, why should you select one to be operated by hand, calling for work, and limited in its possibilities? Why not get one of these which will give you better music and a variety of effects which, as we have shown, cannot be obtained from any other?

The violin gives the sweetest of all music. You need only select the accompaniment—piano, cello or xylophone—which you like best.

Pages from *The Electrical Mastery of Music*, showing the Violano-Virtuoso in use in a home, in a hotel lobby, on an ocean liner or rail car.



On the Ocean Liner

WITH all the games and amusements provided by the great steamship companies for their passengers, there is nothing which can fill the place of music, nothing which can make the time pass so agreeably in fair weather or foul.

Our self-playing Violin and its accompaniment will be the next innovation in steamship equipment, and it will not only be a source of pleasure to the ocean traveler, but an advertisement of value to their line. The boat which carries one of these instruments can give daily musical programs of such high character that only praise can result.

Think of the immense repertoire offered in our music rolls and the advantage over any other instrument or even of an orchestra in the variety of selections it is master of. All that is needed to provide entertainment such as people willingly pay for when they go to hear a famous string orchestra is readily and abundantly provided for when the order is placed for one of our instruments.

For the Railroad Train

What we have said about providing music for steamships is applied equally well to trains. Performers cannot be considered, a player-piano is too bulky; a talking machine is too crude; but now, come these instruments any of which will occupy no more space than one of the large easy chairs, and will completely satisfy the universal demand for music.

In 1928 Samson moved to new premises in Robin Hood Court, London. Ralph Mills, son of Herbert S. Mills, visited and appointed the firm as the exclusive European agent for the Mills Novelty Company. Bert Mills recalled that hardly any Violanos were sold in European countries other than England. Years later in the 1950s, Frank Holland, then in the process of forming the British Piano Museum, acquired several of these instruments in their original wooden shipping crates that Samson had stored.¹⁰¹

The Music Trade Review, August 15, 1925, told of business in Chicago:

One of the busiest plants in the city at present is the Mills Novelty Co., maker of the Violano-Virtuoso. This electric violin and piano, made in 12 models, some of which run as high as \$3,000 retail cost, has been a revelation to many members of the trade and professional musicians through its excellent reproduction of either violin music or piano and violin duets.

They use from one to four violins, and the instrument, with five compositions on a roll, can be played either manually, through the double bank of keys, or produce equal beauty of tone and power through their electric mechanism. E.E. Parsonage, sales manager, says that the sale of these instruments, which are adequately providing the music for high-class public auditoriums of various uses, is very good at present in the Southwest, in New York, and in the Mississippi Valley.¹⁰²

By the mid-1920s Mills had offices in Chicago, Detroit, Denver, Kansas City (Missouri), New York City, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, San Francisco, Boston, Cincinnati, and Cleveland. Each one had a display of instruments and rolls for sale and had a staff of servicemen.



The manufacturing process at the Mills factory in Chicago: Making the piano backs and sounding boards. (This and the following pictures are from *Building the Violano-Virtuoso*)



Making a Violano-Virtuoso case.



Staining panels and posts as part of case construction and finishing.



Assembling the roll mechanisms, called "feeders" by Mills.

¹⁰¹ The author visited Frank Holland in the early 1960s and purchased a Race Horse Piano in its crate. At the time Holland had two Race Horse Pianos, one Electric Piano, and several Violanos.

¹⁰² The three basic models at the time were two case styles of the single-violin model and one of the DeLuxe double-violin model. Any other models reported were of limited production or were experimental.

Chapter 17

Gallery of Violano-Virtuosos

The Duckworth Collection Early Violano-Virtuoso



A very early Violano-Virtuoso in the first case design used for that instrument, successor to the Automatic Virtuosa and the Pianova Virtuosa.

A very early Violano-Virtuoso was acquired years ago by the late Oswald Wurdeman, then passed to his son, Tom, then to Johnny Duckworth. The case design is that of the early Mills Automatic Virtuosa and the successor Pianova-Virtuosa, the earliest of the Violano-Virtuoso antecedents. This instrument later had a piano and some other components retrofitted. It is the only such surviving example in this cabinet known to the author.