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, Murtagh 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.

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

Hegeler & Ehlers patented self-playing Geigenpiano for sale.
(Zeitschrift für Instrumentenbau, March 11, 1909)

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

Popper & Co., of Leipzig, publicized the Animochord 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*)
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.

For the Home

It is true that new inventions in personal music are not confined to the home, but are adapted for use in public places, schools, stores, etc. Yet, in a moment of consideration, the writer feels that the most universal and interesting aspect of the subject is that it provides for the home.

One of the most interesting and useful of the home inventions is the Violano-Virtuoso, which is a musical instrument that can be played by anyone, regardless of age or skill.

The Violano-Virtuoso is a simple instrument that can be played by anyone, regardless of age or skill. It is a small, portable instrument that can be played by anyone, regardless of age or skill. It is a simple and versatile instrument that can be played by anyone, regardless of age or skill.

For the Ocean Liner

With the increasing popularity of ocean liners, the demand for entertainment has increased. One of the newest and most popular inventions is the Violano-Virtuoso, which is a musical instrument that can be played by anyone, regardless of age or skill.

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For the Railroad Train

With the increasing popularity of rail travel, the demand for entertainment has increased. One of the newest and most popular inventions is the Violano-Virtuoso, which is a musical instrument that can be played by anyone, regardless of age or skill.

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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.

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.
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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.