

T-100 Welte-Mignon - The Actual Cost of Ownership

BY MARK REINHART

How often have we speculated what a particular piano might cost in today's dollars? When a period price list is seen, a rough approximation of cost in modern times may be considered - - but what is the actual cost? Many have written that, when new, the T-100 Welte-Mignon red-paper pianos were very expensive and consequently were only available to the most wealthy patrons, but how expensive in terms of today's (ca. 2000) dollar? There are published pictures of the Welte-Mignon in home settings that are very extravagant; perhaps they're indicative of the degree of wealth necessary to enjoy one of these incredible instruments when they were new.

Dick Howe wrote a comprehensive article for the Winter, 1991 MBSI Bulletin for converting original prices into current US dollars. I spoke to Dick recently and he supplied me with the multipliers to determine the conversion of earlier US prices to the year 2000. As the Welte-Mignon approaches the centennial of its invention, let's examine what a buyer in the USA could have paid when the piano and rolls were new and what that would represent in terms of today's dollar.

The earliest listing of the "Mignon" I have found is from a 1907 program. The only model listed was the Welte-Mignon in a cabinet piano, the first model offered in the USA. The cost in 1907 was \$1,500. Using the Hourly Wage Index, that same piano would cost \$117,331 in the year 2000! This is certainly not a purchase for your average consumer.

The buyer of this fine piano also needed music rolls to play. The earliest US catalog I have seen is the 1908 List of Music for Welte-Mignon. This catalog, a year later than the program, gives a close approximation of the cost of T-100 red Welte rolls for our 1907 buyer. The following list cites performances by some of the most celebrated pianists of the day. Included on the list are a few works requiring more than one roll to complete the opus. The highest price of any roll in the 1908 catalog was \$15 and the lowest \$2. I have converted the 1908 prices to equivalent 2000 prices using the Hourly Wage Index.

	1908	2000
	US \$	US \$
Busoni		
#443 Adelaide Beethoven-Liszt	\$12.00	\$922.00
Carreño		
#361 Fantasie C major, Op. 17 part 1 R. Schumann	\$14.00	\$1157.00
#362 Fantasie C major, Op. 17 part 2 R. Schumann	\$8.50	\$703.00
#372 Sonata Waldstein Beethoven pt. 1	\$8.50	\$703.00
#373 Sonata Waldstein Beethoven pt.2	\$15.00	\$1240.00
Paderewski		
#1246 Sonata Moonlight mvmts. 1 & 2 Beethoven	\$14.00	\$1157.00
#1247 Sonata Moonlight mvmt. 3 Beethoven	\$10.50	\$868.00
Emil von Sauer		
#876 Don Juan Fantasie Liszt	\$15.00	\$1240.00
#881 Etude Op. 25, No. 9 Staccato Chopin	\$2.00	\$165.00

The last US catalog for T-100 red-paper Welte-Mignon rolls was published in 1920 by the Welte-Mignon Corporation. Comparing again the prices for the same music rolls, we see both a decline in the retail prices from 1908 and a concurrent decline in the value of the dollar. The dollar decline can be attributed, at least partially, to the effects of inflation and the economic fallout from World War I.

This decline in the value of the dollar cannot be ignored and is evident when one compares the two closest 1908 and 1920 dollar values to their 2000 counterparts. (The 1920 dollar value comes from the next price list below.)

1908	2000
US \$	US \$
\$8.50	\$703.00
1920	
US \$	
\$7.75	\$217.00

In terms of 1920 dollars, the example's 75¢ shortfall from the 1908 amount of \$8.50 equals approximately \$21. So the actual decline in value of the 1920 from the 1908 dollar could more clearly be expressed as follows:

1908	2000
\$8.50	\$703.00
1920	
\$8.50	\$238.00

The decline in roll prices can be attributed to increased productivity which results from more efficient production. This is especially true when prices drop during a period of inflation.

The prices below would appear to be veritable bargains, but are still far above what the average consumer could afford when viewed in terms of 2000 dollars. The highest price for any roll in the 1920 catalog is \$7.75.

	1920	2000
	US \$	US \$
Busoni		
#443 Adelaide Beethoven-Liszt	\$5.75	\$161.00
Carreño		
#361 Fantasie C major, Op. 17 part 1 R. Schumann	\$6.00	\$168.00
#362 Fantasie C major, Op. 17 part 2 R. Schumann	\$5.00	\$140.00
#372 Sonata Waldstein Beethoven pt. 1	\$5.50	\$154.00
#373 Sonata Waldstein Beethoven pt.2	\$7.75	\$217.00
Paderewski		
#1246 Sonata Moonlight mvmts. 1 & 2 Beethoven	\$7.75	\$217.00
#1247 Sonata Moonlight mvmt. 3 Beethoven	\$6.75	\$189.00
Emil von Sauer		
#876 Don Juan Fantasie Liszt	\$7.75	\$217.00
#881 Etude Op. 25, No. 9 Staccato Chopin	\$3.00	\$84.00

As can be seen from the lists that follow, the US dollar remained relatively stable from 1920 to 1927 as opposed to the period from 1908 to 1920.

Not long after 1920, production of T-100 red-paper Welte-Mignon rolls was discontinued by the Welte-Mignon Corp. in the US. The focus changed to sales of organ rolls and the new Purple Seal Welte-Mignon rolls for use on their new Welte-Mignon "Original" piano which was scaled to play Welte-Mignon Licensee rolls as well. If the buyer of that 1907 Welte-Mignon wanted new music, rolls were available from Europe. How, then, do those prices compare to today's? The German catalog, which was comprehensive to October 1925, priced our list of rolls as follows:

		1925 <u>D-Mark</u>	1925 <u>US\$</u>	2000 <u>US\$</u>
Busoni				
#443	Adelaide Beethoven-Liszt	24DM	\$5.71	\$160.00
Carreño				
#361	Fantasia C major, Op. 17 part 1 R. Schumann	24 DM	\$5.71	\$160.00
#362	Fantasia C major, Op. 17 part 2 R. Schumann	22 DM	\$5.24	\$147.00
#372	Sonata Waldstein Beethoven pt. 1	22 DM	\$5.24	\$147.00
#373	Sonata Waldstein Beethoven pt.2	24 DM	\$5.71	\$160.00
Paderewski				
#1246	Sonata Moonlight mvmts. 1 & 2 Beethoven	24 DM	\$5.71	\$160.00
#1247	Sonata Moonlight mvmt. 3 Beethoven	24 DM	\$5.71	\$160.00
Emil von Sauer				
#876	Don Juan Fantasia Liszt	24 DM	\$5.71	\$160.00
#881	Etude Op. 25, No. 9 Staccato Chopin	12 DM	\$2.86	\$80.00

It's interesting to note that if a German catalog had been issued earlier (say 1921-22), it almost certainly would have reflected the calamitous decline in the value of the Mark. The inflationary spiral in Germany during the early 1920s was of a far, far greater magnitude than that which occurred with the value of the dollar between 1908 and 1920. In 1921, a T-100 roll could easily have cost 2.4 million Marks!

Even later, the 1927 catalog published in England continued to offer the buyer of the 1907 Welte-Mignon piano a source for music. How, then, do these prices compare to today's?

		1927 <u>GB-Sterling</u>	1927 <u>US\$</u>	2000 <u>US\$</u>
Busoni				
#443	Adelaide Beethoven-Liszt	24 shillings	\$5.83	\$155.00
Carreño				
#361	Fantasia C major, Op. 17 part 1 R. Schumann	24 shillings	\$5.83	\$155.00
#362	Fantasia C major, Op. 17 part 2 R. Schumann	22 shillings	\$5.35	\$142.00
#372	Sonata Waldstein Beethoven pt. 1	22 shillings	\$5.35	\$142.00
#373	Sonata Waldstein Beethoven pt.2	24 shillings	\$5.83	\$155.00
Paderewski				
#1246	Sonata Moonlight mvmts. 1 & 2 Beethoven	24 shillings	\$5.83	\$155.00
#1247	Sonata Moonlight mvmt. 3 Beethoven	24 shillings	\$5.83	\$155.00
Emil von Sauer				
#876	Don Juan Fantasia Liszt	24 shillings	\$5.83	\$155.00
#881	Etude Op. 25, No. 9 Staccato Chopin	12 shillings	\$2.92	\$77.50

Clearly, the 1907 buyers of the Welte-Mignon were well-heeled indeed. While the cost of music rolls declined significantly from 1908, even the 1927 prices were anything but cheap. The introduction of the Welte-Mignon Licensee into the US marketplace in 1916 enabled more accessibility to the Welte-Mignon library at a much lower cost. Shortly after 1920, DeLuxe Licensee rolls were priced no higher than \$2. Nevertheless, the Licensee roll was still a product most people could not afford. T-100 Welte-Mignon pianos and their music really were within the reach of only the most wealthy buyers.