

# About the PA eroll music

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## **Overview**

These notes give an outline of the music contained in the Phillips-Ampico eroll MIDI files that are now available from [www.petersmidi.com](http://www.petersmidi.com). For more information download the document *About the erolls*, which outlines the history behind, and how these files were produced.

## **Background**

In 1905, when German company Welte and Sons marketed the first reproducing piano, they included a number of rolls made by some of the best known pianists and composers of the day (Debussy, Ravel etc).

This invention was the first to make it possible for people to hear high fidelity piano performances in their living room, providing they could afford the rolls and the instrument (about the price of a suburban house). At the time, some rolls cost around \$1000 in today's money, making these instruments a plaything of the wealthy.

However, by 1915 other companies were marketing their brand of "reproducing piano" and the rolls to go with it. The major names were Welte, Hupfeld, Philipps, Art Echo, Atrio Angelus, Duo-Art and the American Piano Company, known as Ampico. The recordings described here are from Ampico reproducing piano rolls.

The reproducing piano industry was huge, employing thousands, kept busy by making recordings of virtually every famous concert pianist of the day, as well as a host of popular pianists. It all ended with the depression, and faded away to virtual obscurity by the end of the 1930s. The legacy however is a vast number of reproducing piano rolls, covering a huge range of pianists and musical styles.

## **Piano roll accuracy**

Arguments rage as to how faithful piano roll recordings are. Certainly many of the pianists who made the rolls felt the results were authentic. In a BBC radio program *The Great Piano Roll Mystery*, broadcast December 24, 1962 Ampico artist Benno Moiseiwitsch refers to his rolls as being "sometimes astonished by their faithfulness". When asked about the ability of a reproducing piano roll to faithfully record an artist's performance he says: "Absolutely, if you take great care and patience. It's tiresome, but it's a commercial product. It can be done, it has been done."

The big mystery is how the dynamics of a performance were recorded. Very little information survives about this, probably because each company wanted to protect their methods. There were patents on the pneumatic player systems, but nothing on the methods used to record the roll dynamics. The only documented system is that used by Ampico after 1925.

## **The pianists**

Like recording companies of today, each reproducing piano company had a list of exclusive artists. Ampico had Levitzki, Rachmaninoff, Moiseiwitsch, Nyiregyhazi, Lhévinne, even Fritz Kreisler, better known as a violinist. In some cases a pianist would record for more than one company, or their recordings would be converted from one system to another. For example, the PA eroll collection includes recordings converted by Ampico from Hupfeld recordings. Towards the end, Ampico and the Aeolian Company combined, resulting in a number of conversions between rolls. An example is Gershwin's recording of *Rhapsody in Blue*, originally made for Duo-Art, but converted to Ampico sometime in the late 1930s.

At the time, the phonograph industry was in its infancy, making the reproducing piano the best means of hearing a piano performance. It's therefore little wonder pianists took advantage of this technology, as apart from income, it also made them more widely known.

A parallel to this would be concert pianists of today making recordings for the Disklavier or PianoDisc. Yamaha has released MIDI file recordings by Jorg Demus, but very few other concert pianists record for the MIDI medium.

The main legacy of the reproducing piano roll industry is therefore the range of roll recordings, many of which were made by pianists from the "Golden Age". For a full list of pianists in the collection, download the *Pianist order* catalogs.

### **The repertoire**

Reproducing piano rolls were classified as either classical or popular. The classical listing includes what was known as *salon* music, intended for performance in a small studio or hall. Examples include music by Moszkowski, whose works bordered on being concert performances, and Nevin, who composed items like *Glowworm*. These works are rarely heard today.

Apart from the wide ranging repertoire, there's also the style of the performances. At the time, pianists were often called interpreters, with pianists often adding their "bit" to the music. Although out of fashion today, it's refreshing to hear a well known work interpreted by a top line pianist who departs somewhat from the score.

An example in the collection is Alexander MacFadyen's arrangement of *Meditation from Thais*. This glittering and colorful arrangement could have been made by Liszt. The PA collection also includes a version of this piece as per the score. Others are the arrangements of Wagner tunes by Cornelius Rybner, a true romantic, born in 1855.

Some concert pianists also recorded their arrangement of a popular tune. An example is Mischa Levitzki's sweeping arrangement of *Annie Laurie*. Rachmaninoff recorded his arrangement of *The Star Spangled Banner*.

Piano transcriptions were popular at the time, with Liszt being a pioneer in this art form. The PA eroll collection has virtually every Liszt piece recorded for the Ampico, including numerous transcriptions (operatic, symphonies, songs etc). Some of the pianists performing Liszt pieces studied with Liszt.

Chopin is widely represented in the piano roll repertoire, with the collection containing 110 performances of works by Chopin. See website to download Chopin's Etude Op.15 No.6 played by Moriz Rosenthal, a renowned pianist who studied with Chopin's pupil and editor Carl Mikuli.

Most classical composers are represented in the collection, including some whose works are now rarely heard. When you hear some of these works, you'll wonder why. For a full list of composers in the collection, download the *Composer order* catalogs.

### **Popular music**

The popular repertoire is equally extensive. As listed on the next page, popular music covered a range of styles, in particular recordings of the latest songs. Many of these are now forgotten, but some have become classics, such as *Star Dust*, *April in Paris*, many Gershwin songs and so on.

Ampico had an extensive range of Dinner Music rolls, with many of these recorded by Frank Milne. These recordings are among my personal favorites. Other performers include Victor Arden, Vincent Lopez, Ferdie Grofe (composed *Grand Canyon Suite*), Adam Carroll and many more. In 2008, a CD of Richard Rodgers performing on piano, both live and by piano roll, was issued by Harbinger Records. The piano roll recordings on the CD are PA MIDI files that were played on a digital piano.

## **The PA eroll collection**

The collection is divided into classical and popular. Brief statistics:

- 1431 items grouped as 713 popular items and 718 classical items.
- 483 composers represented (186 classical, 297 popular).
- 283 pianists represented (accounting for pseudonyms). Includes 161 concert pianists.
- Earliest roll recording is dated 1911 (*Rigoletto Paraphrase* (Verdi-Liszt) played by Busoni, from Hupfeld).
- Most recent is dated June 1941 (*Dinner Music #19*).
- Includes 20 rolls produced in the 1970s (some from original Ampico masters that were never released).
- Shortest recording is *Breezes* (Schmitt) at 0:46, longest is *Tannhauser Overture* (Wagner) at 15:44.

*Classical* items fall into these categories:

- **Ballet** – music from the ballet (10 items)
- **Concert** – music typically heard in a concert hall or performed by a concert pianist (407 items)
- **Concerto** – piano concertos, excluding Bach's *Italian Concerto* (3 concertos)
- **Opera** – music from the opera, excluding operatic overtures (51 items)
- **Overtures** – overtures, mainly from operas (19 items)
- **Salon** – music typically heard in a small hall (salon), or music *not* generally performed in a concert hall or by a concert pianist. A guide only. (187 items)
- **Sonatas** – piano sonatas (8 complete sonatas, including 3 performances of Moonlight Sonata)
- **Symphonies** – piano arrangements of orchestral symphonies (4 symphonies)

*Popular* items fall into these categories:

- **Ballads** – slow songs not intended for dancing (89 items)
- **Dinner music** – medleys intended as background music, but see also under Medley (21 items)
- **Marches** – marches or music with a march tempo (13 items)
- **Medleys** – items containing more than one song, either as a medley or as separate pieces in the same recording (47 items)
- **Show Tunes** – medleys of show tunes (37 items)
- **Song-Dance** – music to sing or dance to (499 items)
- **Xmas** – Christmas songs or music (7 items)

## **The future**

We believe the future of reproducing piano roll music lies in converting the rolls to MIDI files. We also know it is essential to do the conversion from paper to electronic media in a way that preserves every detail of the original roll. After all, many of the artists who recorded on reproducing piano rolls were of an exceptionally high standard, with some now regarded as legendary. Work is well under way on the development of a new, sophisticated roll reader. Plans include producing MIDI files of various types of reproducing piano rolls, not just Ampico.

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