I Can’t Believe It’s Not Borodin!

Documenting Performance Practice with Piano Rolls

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Music Special Collections Librarian, UNT
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The Joe M. Morris Collection at UNT

5431 piano rolls

378 audio cylinders

Knabe-Ampico player piano

Various other media formats and players
The Hardware

Knabe piano

Ampico-B rolls, “automatic expression”

Works through a system of pneumatic tubes

Binary before it was cool:

Hole in paper = Play that note.

No hole in paper = Don’t play that note.
Why piano rolls?

Higher-fidelity recording than other formats at the time

Remarkable subtlety of timing captured by punching holes in steadily scrolling paper

A surprising array of well-known composers performed their own works, and those of others - Rachmaninoff, Grieg, Saint-Saëns, Copland, Ravel

Prominent concert pianists of the time recorded rolls prolifically, and are more accessible on piano rolls than other media

A more diverse set of performers, who were largely bypassed by phonograph recordings

Another angle on the development of the American “canon” of “classical” music
But weren’t they edited?

Yes, sometimes to great effect (Conlon Nancarrow, Vincent Lopez)

Editors conferred with performers

It was good enough for Rachmaninoff

Playback of any format loses something from the live experience

Every recording format entails one or more degrees of mediation between composer and listener

Composer → printed page → performer → recording technology → studio editing/mixing → playback technology → listener
Points of comparison

The same performer on piano roll and sound disc (78 rpm, etc.)

Past performers versus modern ones

Different performers playing the same work

The same performer earlier and later in their career
Example 1: Sergei Rachmaninoff

Rachmaninoff: “Gentlemen, I, Sergei Rachmaninoff, have just heard myself play!”

Piano roll compared to Gramophone


Shows fidelity of piano roll recording: not just a steampunk MIDI file
Example 2: Antoinette Szumowska

Student and cousin of Ignace Jan Paderewski.

No recordings located, in spite of a distinguished career (ca. 1895-1925)
Szumowska: Chopin’s Mazurka, Op. 24, C major

Piano roll compared to later recordings:

   Su Yeon Kim, Chopin Institute, 2015

   Henryk Sztompka, 1959
Example 3: Ervin Nyiregyházi (1903-1987)

Former child prodigy

Very eccentric: "In 1946, he agreed to give a recital in L.A. only if permitted to appear disguised by a silk hood; he was advertised as “Mr. X—Masked Pianist” (Bazzana, Fugue.us)

Very LOUD

1927 performance (roll) compared to 1978 (video)
Conclusions

Urgency of preserving piano rolls and the history they document

Tremendous amount of research waiting to happen
Thank you!

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