

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


Schubert-Rachmaninoff: Wohin? / “The Brooklet”

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)



ANTOINETTE SZUMOWSKA
The Brilliant Pianist of the
Adamowska Trio

Whose artistry was revealed in the fine program given before the Art Society in Carnegie Music Hall last night, is a devoted admirer—as are her two associates, the brothers Adamowska—of the great

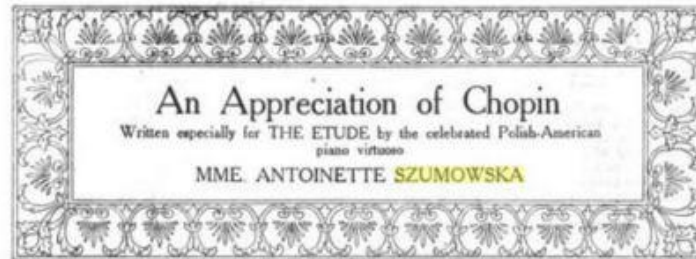
Mason & Hamlin
Piano

instructor.

Mme. Szumowska says:

“Paderewski lays great stress on legato playing, and desires everything to be studied slowly, with deep touch and with full, clear tone. For developing strength he uses an exercise for which the hand is pressed against the keyboard while the wrist remains very low and motionless and each finger presses on a key, bringing, or drawing out as much tone as possible.

“Paderewski advises studying scales and arpeggios with accents, for instance, accenting



An Appreciation of Chopin
Written especially for THE ETUDE by the celebrated Polish-American
piano virtuoso
MME. ANTOINETTE SZUMOWSKA

Mme. Szumowska was born in Lublin, near Warsaw, her father, a college professor, having settled there on his return from Siberia, where he had been sent as a political exile in 1863. She was educated at the college in Warsaw, from which she was graduated with high honors. She had studied music as a child, but did not begin seriously to study of the piano until after her graduation from college. She then became a pupil of Professor Kozłowski at the Conservatory in Warsaw, and also Alexander Michalowski.

In 1890 she went to Paris, and there attracted the attention of Paderewski, who was so impressed with her musical gifts that he offered to become her teacher, and for five years Mme. Szumowska enjoyed the advantages of his instruction and advice of the great Polish pianist. After being under his training one year she began to play in public, making a successful debut at the Salle Erard, Paris, 1891. The following year she played in London in Herzog's Symphony Concerts, at the Saturday Pops, the Crystal Palace Orchestral Concerts, and in a series of recitals at St. James Hall. In 1893 she made a concert tour of the English provinces, and also played in Warsaw, Kiev, and Lemberg. She paid her first visit to America in 1895, when she appeared with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in Boston and in New York, and with the Thomas and Hammons orchestras in various cities. In September, 1898, Mme. Szumowska married Mr. Josef Adamowski, the well known cellist.

While playing with the trio before the Cas. Casaria, and the Russian courts, in Spain, Poland, Mme. Szumowska was presented with a diamond brooch by the empress, which is considered one of the highest honors in Russia.

It seems natural that in this year, which marks the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of the great Polish composer, our thoughts should go to him—to him, whose memory must be dear to every musician, above all, to every pianist. What would become of the piano literature if we should eliminate from it the works of Chopin? It would be shorn of its poetry, very much like a plant, when we tear away the crowning glory of its blossom. We get the best proof of Chopin's significance in piano literature when we look over a number of programs for piano recitals. On each of them the name of one or more of even the greatest composers may be missing, but Chopin is nearly always represented, generally in several numbers. It is a well-known fact—his compositions are essentially pianistic. If the piano had a soul it would seem as though Chopin had appropriated it, or, as if his own has grown into it—inseparably. If he tries to write for some other instrument, even the human voice, his inspiration seems to desert him in a way; he is never at his greatest. If we endeavor to transcribe one of his poems for some instrument it loses its flavor, so to speak. And how hard it is to play Chopin as he ought to be played! It seems as if no one is so often misinterpreted as this great poet. He is either misunderstood and treated coldly and dryly, or over-sentimentalized. (Of the two, the first

stand the wonderful poetry of Chopin's music, the sad flow of his melody, the intensity of his passionate moods, but above all, it will teach us to comprehend his infinite simplicity. For Chopin is simple—simple as only real greatness can be simple. The mountain tops are simple in the snowy grandeur of their lines. And Chopin's melodies always flow so simply, so naturally. This is why they generally find their way straight to the human



MME. ANTOINETTE SZUMOWSKA.

Szumowska: Chopin's Mazurka, Op. 24, C major

Piano roll compared to later recordings:

Su Yeon Kim, Chopin Institute, 2015

Henryk Sztompka, 1959

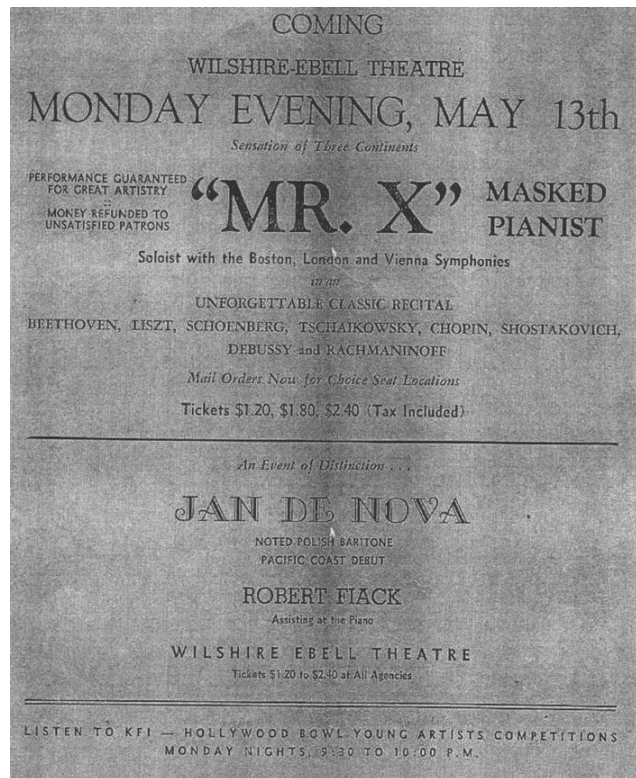
Example 3: Ervin Nyiregyházi (1903-1987)

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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