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Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association

Honor Roll

FRANK LAFFITTE

An Interview with the celebrated pianist in June 1975.

Mr. Laffitte, who recorded several Duo-Art rolls in the 1920s, began by recalling his earliest memories of the player piano ...

Q: How were you introduced to the player piano?

A: I was never a very strong child and it was thought that sea air was good for me; so I was often sent to stay with my Nanny, Mrs. Harris, and her half-brother Mr. Fry, at Tankerton (near Whitstable). She had a Steck upright pianola which she and he used to play. At the beginning of the First World War she decided that she wanted a new pianola and she asked me to accompany her to London to choose one. We went to Aeolian Hall in New Ford Street. In the showroom we were confronted by a most lovely Steinway brand. I started playing it, and said at once: "Nurse, you must have this piano." She said: "Yes, mischief, but I will never be able to give all that money for it" - it was £300 - "and what will Mr. Fry say?" In the end she did, regardless of what Mr. Fry would say!

Q: Was either of them a pianist?

A: No. They knew nothing about music, but they loved it. They gave musical evenings at which she and Mr. Fry played at intervals - between cups of coffee - solos on the pianola. From my bedroom I could always tell which one of them was playing.

Q: What sort of music did they play?

A: They had many beautiful rolls of music which would nowadays seem rather old-fashioned.. For instance, there were the Fantasies on La Sonnambula and La Norma of Feilini. More important for me were the Waldstein and Moonlight Sonatas of Beethoven. When I came to learn the Waldstein later I knew already just how it went, though I had never heard it played by a pianist.

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This advert appeared on the reverse of a notice of one of Mr. Laffitte's recitals in the late 1920's. The Franck item, the Debussy "Images" and Ireland's "Ragamuffin" were, it is believed, never marketed by Duo-Art.

Q: How did your career develop?

A: My first teacher was my Mother and I still remember well the things she taught me. For years she used to sit in judgment over my performances and what she said was invariably right. In 1915 I became a student at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. My Father never wanted me to become a musician, but when Sir Landon Ronald heard me play he convinced him that this was what I must be.

Q: By then you were only 14. What happened about your ordinary schooling?

A: I had private lessons from a master at the City of London School, where my brother and I were being educated, and where my Father was principal French teacher, and head of the Modern Languages Department. At the Guildhall I won all the piano prizes (save one) and finally the Gold Medal. In 1920 my teacher, Marmaduke Barton, decided that I was 'ready' and I made my debut at the Queen's Hall. I played Schumann's Concerto under Sir Landon Ronald, and three Debussy Preludes. (Debussy had died only recently. He was considered very 'modern' then.) I ended the programme with the Second Concerto of Rachmaninov.

After that I played in Brussels with great success. Eugene Ysaye, the old King of violinists, heard me and was impressed. Later I played the McDowell Second Concerto in the Brussels Opera House. Pierre Monteux and his wife were in the audience. He sent for me afterwards and engaged me to play in Amsterdam. I was 'under his wing' for about three years.

Q: When did you join the BBC?

A: In 1925. I was with them for 41 years, until 1966. I played under many famous conductors, including Aylmer Buesst, Albert Coates, Clarence Raybould, Kneale Kelly, Sir Adrian Boult, Joseph Lewis, Sir Malcolm Sargent, Sir Dan Godfrey and Sir Eugene Goossens. For my last concerto engagement, the Debussy Centenary of 1962, I played the Fantaisie under Arthur Hurst, who was a pupil of Monteux.

Q: Did you meet Ravel?

A: Yes. He was staying in London with a friend, Madame Alvar, who was a Swedish opera singer. He was a very short man, very immaculately dressed, and rather cold. I was really too frightened to suggest playing to him, but he suddenly turned to me and said: "Nous allons jouer les valse de Chabrier a deux pianos." I didn't know them: I was sight-reading them. But it seemed to be all right, so I plucked up courage and said: "Maitre, would you hear me play your Sonatine?" and he replied: "Mais certainement." Afterwards, I asked him if he had anything to say. He said: "No. I say everything in the score. Mais c'est tres bien." I was happy; from him this was really something.

He was in the process of writing his G major Piano Concerto and I asked him what it would be like. He said: "Ca sera Bach, Mozart, jazz."

Q: Was he serious?

A: He was very serious.

Q: He wasn't a very good pianist, was he?

A: He was an extraordinary pianist. I've never heard such a peculiar touch. It was exactly as if

the hammers, instead of hitting the wires, were hitting glass. And they were similar pianos - both Steinways.

Q: How were you introduced to the Aeolian Company?

A: That happened through the BBC. Kenneth Wright, who was then Director of Music, suggested to Percy Scholes that I might make some Duo-Art records. Scholes immediately jumped on it. They drew up a three-year contract. At my first recording session, one afternoon in 1927, I made a Beethoven Sonata, the "Prelude, Aria and Finale" of Franck, and I think "Ragamuffin". There were three sessions in all.

Q: Who choose the music you recorded?

A: The Aeolian Company. They told me what they wanted.

Q: What sort of piano did you play for the recordings?

A: It was a Weber grand of 'drawing room' size. There was a thing like a large hosepipe which came from underneath the piano and connected with the recording machine in the adjoining room.

Q: From the point of view of performance, this was a perfectly normal, good piano?

A: Oh, yes. It was a beautiful piano.

Q: Was the room in which you played at Aeolian Hall equipped like a studio?

A: Yes. It was not very big. The piano was in the middle of the room, and Reginald Reynolds was sitting to one side at a kind of a console.

Q: Had he the music in front of him?

A: I can't remember that. I don't think he had. He knew the works, anyway; he was a very fine musician. I remember how intent he was.

Q: What was he doing?

A: I don't know. There were controls, but they didn't tell you anything about them.

Q: Was there a microphone in the room?

A: No.

Q: How long after each recording session were you able to hear the proof copies of your rolls?

A: That I can't remember; it was a little time afterwards. I went up to hear several of them, but I didn't hear the Franck or the Debussy "Images".

Q: So these were marketed without your signature?

A: Oh, no. I can remember signing the master rolls. Incidentally, they asked me to spell Frank with a "c:" Franc. They thought it would be more fashionable, I suppose. As a matter of fact my name isn't Frank at all; it's Francis. It was Sir Landon Ronald who changed it: when I won the Gold Metal at Guildhall, I found it stamped Frank Laffitte. That's what I've been ever since.

Q: When you heard the proof copies of the rolls, were you invited to make corrections or alterations?

A: No. You couldn't make alterations, apart, from correcting a wrong note. There was no cheating. You could always repeat a performance but I never had any trouble like that. I was always very particular and self-critical to a degree. If you're not self-critical, other people will jolly-well criticize you.

Q: Do you think that the rolls you made for the Aeolian Company furthered your career?

A: I was considered one of the rising young pianists, and it was a very big thing to make records for the Duo-Art piano. It gave one stature.

Q: What was your favorite roll?

A: "Equinox" by John Ireland. This was often used by the Aeolian Company in their public concerts. It is a piece I like very much. Ireland heard me play it and was really very pleased.

Q: Did you hear the other makes of the reproducing piano?

A: Yes, I did. I always considered the Duo-Art the most faithful.

Q: Mr. Laffitte, thank you very much for these fascinating reminiscence.