



AMICA International Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association Honor Roll

A CONVERSATION WITH HERMAN KORTLANDER

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The following is transcribed from a tape-recorded 1985 interview with the now deceased, Herman Kortlander, who was at that time 85 years of age. From 1931 to 1967, Herman Kortlander was involved in the managerial operations of Imperial Industrial, manufacturer of Q.R.S. Music Rolls which was, during that period, owned by his brother Max.

Although Herman Kortlander did not record piano rolls, he knew such artists as J. Lawrence Cook, Frank Milne, J. Russel Robinson and Rudy Erlebach. In the 1950s he established the QRS "Personality Series" of rolls played as arranged by well-known artists of the time.

Interviewer Bill Burkhardt knew Herman Kortlander personally. Burkhardt first met Herman in 1957 when, as a child vacationing with his parents, he toured the Imperial Industrial Company in New York. Their friendship was renewed in the spring of 1984 when Herman returned to live in his home town of Grand Rapids, Michigan. The friendship continued until Herman's death on July 12, 1987. Friends and family, at the request of Herman's brother, gathered at Bill Burkhardt's home after the funeral to hear QRS rolls and remember Herman. Herman Kortlander was an Honorary Member of AMICA.

In addition to Herman Kortlander those in the discussion were Jim Weisenborne, Bill Burkhardt and Bill Blodgett.

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JIM: We are talking with Herman Kortlander of Grand Rapids, Michigan in the home of Bill Burkhardt. Mr. Kortlander, can you tell us how you happened to work for the Q. R. S. Piano Roll Company?

HERMAN: Well, I was working for the Grand Rapids Press in the advertising department, and the Depression came, and being a new man, with others, I was laid off. My brother [Max Kortlander] bought the Q. R. S. Music Company in New York and, naturally, he would give me a job, so I went East and worked for him in the office.

JIM: About what year would that have been? HERMAN: That was about 1931, I guess.

Herman Kortlander seated at Bill Burkhardt's Weber Duo-Art Louiv XVI grand - May, 1987.

JIM: You were telling me tonight at dinner about some interesting innovations during World War II when you were making rolls at Q. R. S. You talked about a little eyelet.

HERMAN: Oh, well, we had a very inventive foreman, so we had no trouble producing the rolls because we couldn't get rubber bands, for instance. He made a jig to put tape on the roll so that we could turn them out fast. Of course, the roll was tight, but when the seal was broken, it was loose. At least we could sell them right in the box.

Another thing, we couldn't get the brass eyelets, so he invented another jig to make little cardboard eyelets for hooking onto the piano [take up spool]. That was a big help to us to make the rolls.

BILL BLODGETT: In a World War II picture [photograph] I think that I saw a picture of employees standing behind a banner. Someone told me that they [Q. R. S.] had made something else in addition to rolls.

HERMAN: What could it be? Max only knew the roll business, and I can't remember him doing anything else. Of course, the old Q. R. S. Company did make [phonograph] records, and they did other things too, but basically the roll business.

JIM: But the manufacturing of records, was that prior to Max?

HERMAN: Well, Max was there, because he was with them since 1915 in Chicago.

BILL BLODGETT: How old was he in 1915?

HERMAN: Well, he'd be about 25, I guess. He was 10 years older than me. He was born in 1890. He died in 1961 at 71. He was ailing with a sort of diabetes situation.

JIM: I own some Q. R. S. rolls sold during World War II, and the boxes are very plain cardboard with tape on the outside edges...

HERMAN: Oh, that was during the war time and we couldn't get the coverings. There were a lot of things we could not get during the war. We could get paper, but we couldn't get the manufacturer to do the work. They didn't have help. Men had gone to war or were working in war factories. So we did have difficulties, and it was the busiest time, too. We sold more rolls! It was like the old days. We sold something like 5,000 rolls a day, and we had all 3 perforators running all day long, and overtime pay, and extra girls to assemble the rolls and fill the orders.

JIM: Can you remember who were some of the recording artists during the war years?

HERMAN: Well, [J. Lawrence] Cook was the main one. Then we had Frank Milne.

BILL BLODGETT: How long was he with the company?

HERMAN: Well, he was with the company for several years, but he died of a lung disease from smoking. But he was with another company, Rhythmodik, or some such name. Of course, they all failed, you know. Max was the only one left. There was enough business to keep the roll company going because there were so many player pianos made. And a lot of people would not give up these players.

JIM: Incidentally, how did Frank Milne pronounce his last name? Was it MIL-ney?

HERMAN: MIL-ney. Sometime people think it's Milne, I suppose.

JIM: What was he like to work with? Did you have a chance to watch him work?

HERMAN: Well, he did the same as Cook did. He learned the machine that cut the holes in the masters.

JIM: Did he play the piano well?

HERMAN: Yes, he played pretty well. The fact is that he did some work for AMPICO, I think. And I guess that they [the rolls] were all hand-played, I think. I think that they all used a marking machine at one time.

BILL BURKHARDT: What about Rudy Erlebach?

HERMAN: Oh, Rudy Erlebach. He died, too, while working for us. A young guy. I don't know what happened to him. So it reverted back to just Cook. Max wanted to have an extra man in case anything happened to Cook, so

that he would know the machine [recording piano]. You couldn't just get a man from the street, even though they could play the piano. They wouldn't know how to make the roll.

BILL BURKHARDT: You mentioned earlier this evening that you had an extra perforator also on hand in case there was some damage.

HERMAN: Oh, yes. We did have a perforator in storage just in case we had a fire or some such thing. It was in a warehouse. It didn't cost a lot of money. It was just like furniture. I could store this machine. But we gave that up because it didn't seem like we were going to have any trouble. It was like insurance, a precaution.

JIM: During the war years, where was Q. R. S. located?

HERMAN: We were in the Bronx. Max went from Chicago to New York about 1918 or something like that. There was a fine arts building. Just a recording department, but they put everything together in New York. And they had a factory down by the East River, and they had a big factory, too, because they sold about 2-3 million rolls per year. They were the biggest company. There were a lot of companies making rolls. A lot of player piano factories, too, all in that section.

BILL BURKHARDT: I wanted to ask you about the personality series of rolls that came out, I think, in the 1950s, rolls played as arranged by Frankie Carle, Roger Williams. I'm sure that you had a hand in that.

HERMAN: Well, that came about because I realized that Cook could copy styles. Cook could hear the record, for instance, and he could do the roll. You have to give credit to Cook on that. We sort of got away with that. It was probably not ethical in a way, you know. It was said in a way that it wasn't played by the [actual] artist.

BILL BURKHARDT: What sort of money was an arranger like Lawrence Cook earning in the 1950s-1960s?

HERMAN: Well, not a great deal. Maybe \$50 or \$60 a week. I mean, he was satisfied, so that was it. It was a good salary. The factory girls only got \$20 a week.

BILL BURKHARDT: I understand that Lawrence Cook also worked another job in addition to making arrangements for you.

HERMAN: He worked at the Post Office. He was working for the pension, and he was doing all right. That was after hours, too, in the evening. He worked for us all day.

BILL BLODGETT: When Q. R. S. in the 1920s merged with the DeVry Corporation and started to make [motion picture] projectors, as well as Q. R. S. records and phonographs and all that, it's kind of strange, did they contract and put their name on...

HERMAN: Well, they lost money on that deal. Anyway, they threw everything in the trash, I was told. They tried. But I don't think that worked out, not long anyway. They made some race records, but they didn't keep it up.

BILL BLODGETT: Some of the advertisements said that there were Q. R. S. offices in Toronto and one in Australia and all sorts of places.

HERMAN: I had a catalog showing a picture of Toronto, I think it was, a factory. A big company, wasn't it? One in San Francisco, maybe. Certainly Chicago. I think the business started around the turn of the century, about 1903 or so.

BILL BLODGETT: How did Q. R. S. become involved with Welte?

HERMAN: Well, Max bought the rolls and machines and that was it. These companies were failing. We bought a lot of different companies, junked the machines and used the stock. That's all you could do. We couldn't carry on because they were losing money.

BILL BURKHARDT: But you did actually make Welte Licensee reproducing rolls?

HERMAN: It was a good machine, and they had a lot of good expensive, classical masters. Good ones.

BILL BLODGETT: Were their masters like Q. R. S. masters or completely different?

HERMAN: They were different. You couldn't play them on a regular standard player piano. The notes would sound at the top and bottom. They indented in farther in the roll, you know. Although, Q. R. S. made the Recordo. The expression wasn't as elaborate as Welte or the AMPICO or the Duo-Art.

BILL BLODGETT: I think that Max had done some Recordo rolls, and I was wondering about the coding for the expression. Did he put on his indications?

HERMAN: Well, I don't know. I wasn't there then. That was way back. I really never inquired.

BILL BURKHARDT: What were your duties from the time that you went to Q. R. S. in 1931 through the time you left there in the 1960s?

HERMAN: I just started in the office, more or less. Clerical work in the beginning, but it got a little more elaborate, expanded, as I went along. After Max died I had to do a lot of things that he did. It was easy because I knew what they were and had the experience. I was in charge of shipping, billing, buying. Mrs. Kortlander came down, not every day, but quite often. She didn't do much, but she made the appearance. I had a foreman who was fairly good.

BILL BURKHARDT: Were you in charge of paying royalties to the music publishers? Did you keep track of that?

HERMAN: Oh, yes. I kept track of that. I had a pretty steady job.

BILL BLODGETT: What were the royalties per song?

HERMAN: Well, mostly four cents: two cents for the music; two cents for the words.

BILL BLODGETT: That's what they're still paying!

HERMAN: Except on public domain songs. And many of those are still popular.

BILL BURKHARDT: What were some of your biggest selling rolls? Were some played by Max big sellers?

HERMAN: Well, I don't know who they're played by. But "Beer Barrel Polka" was a big one. "The Music Goes Round and Round" was a tremendous hit.

BILL BLODGETT: Was that one of the rolls that they had to do quickly in order to get it on the market?

HERMAN: Yes. "Beer Barrel Polka" we did rather fast, too. You get it out quickly and you don't lose any sales, you see.

BILL BURKHARDT: What was the cost of a Q. R. S. roll to the dealers in say, the 1930s and 1940s?

HERMAN: In the '30s during the Depression we sold them for as low as 25 cents. And some of the dealers as a leader sold them three for a dollar. So they only made 25 cents on a sale of three rolls. But they usually sold them for a little more, at least 50 cents. In the '20s they were much higher you know. But the Depression was pretty bad, and people didn't have money for luxuries. Music rolls were a luxury. They were not a necessity like food, [and] shelter.

BILL BURKHARDT: Maybe you can tell us just a little bit about your brother, Max, and what type of person he was and what lifestyle he had?

HERMAN: Well, he liked luxurious things, but not fast living. He liked nice things. He liked comfort. He took trips. He'd go to Florida in the winter for a month or so. And he gave parties once and a while. His wife was a good social person.

BILL BLODGETT: I read that Max made most of his money to buy Q. R. S. from his song, "Tell Me".

HERMAN: Well, that did a lot for him. He was able to buy a nice home in Westchester. When he bought the Q. R. S. he actually mortgaged his house to buy it, but he got it all back in a year, because there were still so many players out, and business was still fairly good, but not like the former Q. R. S. Max cut the business down to

size, layed off all the arrangers except Mr. Cook, and lots of factory help. Several perforators were discarded. Cut it right down to size. So he did alright. There was enough business to keep one roll company going.

BILL BLODGETT: When you started in 1931, how many employees were there?

HERMAN: Oh, we had about it varied. In the summer it was less. In the winter time, around Christmas, we did very well and business was very good. There were always about 20 girls in the factory, and about five in the office.

BILL BLODGETT: Who ran the perforators? Was that a special job?

HERMAN: I can't remember any names. But it was always a man running perforators. He had to stand there and watch the master so that it didn't swerve off. He had a little lever there, a knob or something to keep it straight. If the master didn't match up the tracker bar, you'd have a discord. So you had to watch the master while it was running, because it would vary. And the paper, there were 16 sheets on each side of one machine. There were two machines. One machine you could cut about 32 rolls at a time, and it [the paper] was trimmed on each side so that you'd get the exact size. When you bought the paper from the mills, it wouldn't be trued up just right. We used to call that, spaghetti [the trimmings]. And from the holes, we called that [the perforations], saw dust.

JIM: How did you go about choosing the titles that you were going to record?

HERMAN: Well, it was rather easy. You knew what the publishers were going to do. If a song was selling well, you would make a roll. You could tell what a publisher was going to spend or promote. Like Remick or Shapiro/ Bernstein. They didn't just turn out songs that would do nothing. They had to promote them. And the [phonograph] records came out, so you knew right away that something was going to happen to a song. We didn't have much trouble that way. We didn't just make a tune because

we liked it. We sort of knew that it was going to be commercially feasible to do.

BILL BURKHARDT: I noticed in the 1940s, primarily, many old songs, old standards, ballads and the like were updated into a more modern, new arrangement. Did Frank Milne do many of those?

HERMAN: Oh, yes. Some of the old masters were outdated. So we made them more of a ballad style, and I had Frank make over a good many of the ballads which was a good thing, because some of those things were pretty outdated and people didn't like them. They sounded a little bit automatic. Although, we did, [Lawrence] Cook, made some marimba type things later that were very popular because the records were done in that style the pianists, you know. But the marimba was much different from the very early one, more harmonious. You got to play them a little faster. I think of numbers like "That Old Gang of Mine," "Heart of My Heart,"but they were popular, along with the personality series. It seemed to help and we tried to keep up to date.

BILL BLODGETT: Were some of the songs shortened during the war?

HERMAN: Yes. We had to cut down quite a bit from some of the earlier rolls because we couldn't get the money for them. We only got 25 or 30 cents, so we couldn't give as much.

BILL BURKHARDT: When was the last roll recorded by Max Kortlander?

HERMAN: Well, I would say around the early twenties. Maybe twenty one or twenty two. They copied his style. He kind of agreed to that. As long as it was commercial, he didn't mind too much. He didn't go for glory or anything like that.

BILL BURKHARDT: Did you ever meet other Q. R. S. artists such as Pete Wendling or Russell Robinson?

HERMAN: Yes. I met Zez Confrey. He came to the factory once in awhile. Teddy Wilson. He came up to see Cook. Russell Robinson. Lee S. Roberts, on an early visit. But he died in the twenties. He was young. Max was pretty sorry over that. Lee Roberts did a lot for Max. He helped sell that "Tell Me" song. Remick bought that for a hundred thousand dollars. And gave Callahan \$50,000 and Max \$50,000. Callahan was very prolific word writer. He wrote the words to "Smiles." And he was a fine man, too. A blind man. A good lyric writer.

BILL BLODGETT: Can you remember some of Max's other songs?

HERMAN: Well, he had quite a few songs that did fairly well: "Anytime, Any Day, Anywhere," "Bygones; "Like We Used to Be." But the real hit was "Tell me." Which was a pretty good sum of money in those days.

BILL BURKHARDT: After you left the Q. R. S. company in the mid-sixties, you went to Aeolian Music Rolls in Illinois?

HERMAN: No, I went right into New York City. Cook worked there right on 57th street. He left the Q. R. S., you know. A little dispute with Mrs. Kortlander, so he went to Aeolian. When Mrs. Kortlander sold the business, I quit and went to Aeolian. I thought that they could use me. I tried to get them to bring the business to New York where I could handle it better. I couldn't get the rolls out. They had their machines in Oregon, Illinois and they made the pianos in Memphis, Tennessee, something like that, and correspondence and all it was a different kind of help than we had. We could handle the help and get the stuff out. And you had to do it. These songs didn't last long. Some of these songs only lasted two or three weeks. We had to keep making new ones. We made about 20 masters a month. We had a big catalog all the time. There were 50 new songs every day, but we didn't make them all.... less than five a week. But Aeolian couldn't keep that up. I couldn't get them to bring the machines the New York where I could contact the publishers better and do things right, get the help working. The Aeolian Company was terribly slow.

First they were in California, weren't they? But, separation of the business like that you got to have things together. So they were failing, and I was layed off there, too. They gave up their Bronx place and did keep their downtown office on 57th street because they sold some pianos. Cook was there for a little while, but he gave up some months later after I left. Didn't [Ramsi] Tick buy out Aeolian rolls? What did he do with the machines?

BILL BLODGETT: I think that he kept what he could. HERMAN: Well, is he using them?

BILL BLODGETT: Well, he got a two-cut machine, a four-cut machine and the recordo machine.

HERMAN: Well, that's the old Q. R. S. But he didn't use any of the Aeolian stuff, I guess. Probably wasn't worth shipping all that heavy stuff. Q. R. S. machines were the best of any roll company.

BILL BURKHARDT: Were any of the rolls made in the 1930s when you were starting, hand-played? Or were they all strictly machine made rolls?

HERMAN: There were no hand-played rolls. They had to cut corners all the way. Cook marked them out on paper in the beginning, pen and pencil, then he had another machine that could cut them out. We had another fellow to do that. But they gave that up later.

BILL BLODGETT: Did you have any arrangement with Fats Waller when you use his name on the rolls, when Lawrence Cook had taken his arrangement from a phonograph record, was there any payment to Fats Waller?

HERMAN: No. Cook was a friend of his and he allowed him to do it. He [Waller] died in the '30s. We didn't do many. But he [Waller] made some hand-played rolls in the '20s.

BILL BURKHARDT: What about some of the other names that were used for many years on Q. R. S. rolls Sid Laney, Walter Redding...

HERMAN: I don't know how that came about. I wasn't there, but that was just to give a variety to the catalog.

BILL BLODGETT: Max, had he ever done any rolls after 1921, as you mentioned earlier, an occasional roll?

HERMAN: I wasn't there, of course. I didn't come until later. I don't think that they were really his playing. I know that in the 'teens he made the rolls, some of those autographed rolls. They were all hand-played. They might have been edited. He had a machine to add the tremolo notes, and some of these notes might have been added.

BILL BURKHARDT: What are some of your favorite titles in the roll collection that you have?

HERMAN: Oh, I don't know. I like some of the other rolls, in fact. I like this Johnny Johnson on the Welte. I thought that his style was very good. He had some good ballads that I liked.

JIM: What kind of a person was Frank Milne?

HERMAN: Well, he was a nice, refined gentleman. Quiet, easy to talk to, very pleasant. He had a nice style to his playing, and he played very well himself. He lived way down in Belmar, New Jersey, and he used to commute to work. Imagine that! It took him about two hours or more, I guess, to come up to work every day and go back home again. At least four hours.

JIM: About how many years did he work for Q. R. S.?

HERMAN: Oh, I can't tell you that. Unless it would be about five years. He died rather suddenly, and then we got Rudy Erlebach. Max was upset when Milne died. He made nice ballad rolls.

BILL BURKHARDT: You mentioned earlier this evening that your father had purchased four Mason and Hamlin grand pianos in 1913 or 1914?

HERMAN: I came from a musical family, and I guess that mother talked him into buying these pianos, probably at a reduced price, four Mason and Hamlins all at once. One for my brother, two sisters, and his wife. I inherited my mother's and I gave it to my son in Chicago.

BILL BURKHARDT: You have mentioned in the past that it took some period of time for the Q. R. S. company to be liquidated or sold after Max passed away.

HERMAN: It was in his will that I could stay on until I wanted to quit. The business couldn't be sold right away. I don't recall all the details. Anyway, the widow kept the business until Tick came along, and he was really dedicated to it. But he couldn't buy it right away.

JIM: Did you have much of a free hand in running the company after your brother died?

HERMAN: Yes, I really directed the thing. I was a directormanager. I bought materials and took care of things pretty much. I had a foreman in the back and I let the bookkeeper take care of the office. I took care of running things, the music end of it. There was just the widow. She actually wanted to sell the business.

JIM: Did they have any children?

HERMAN: Max had adopted two children at different times. The boy died recently. The girl is still living. She's about 60 years old and lives in the home that Max bought for her in Pacific Palisades, California. The widow died just a few years ago. She was his second wife. His first wife was a native of Grand Rapids. Jean Jones. Her father was of Berkey and Jones, a furniture factory. But they got a divorce about 1932 or so, and he married this other woman. She'd been married before and had a son.

JIM: We were wondering if Max knew a lot of pianists and performers in the entertainment field, and whether he had any pictures taken.

HERMAN: Well, he and Pete Wendling used to go on tours for plugging the rolls. I think that I have a scrapbook showing different conventions where they would play together or separately or whatever for the Q. R. S. Company. And we made all the conventions in Chicago at the Palmer House, displaying our rolls. I went to a lot of them.

JIM: How did you handle a convention? Did you take a player piano with you or get one of the local dealers to bring in a player to demonstrate the rolls?

HERMAN: We had a foreman that made a small spinet piano, and that's how the Winter Piano Company came to make their player, because we had one. Our foreman, as I mentioned before, was kind of an inventive man. So Max said, "Can you make a small player piano instead of a big upright?" They didn't sell anymore because they were so big. So we made a player piano with an electric motor, and it was very compact. So Winter made a little bit bigger piano. It worked pretty good. And that was the outcome of Winter making their cabaret model. It drew a lot of attention. People like to come around and hear it. We gave out catalogs.

BILL BLODGETT: How did Q. R. S. find Hi Babbit?

HERMAN: Well, I had to advertise. A few [people] came up and tried out, but I thought that Babbit was the best. He was playing piano in some of the clubs. Hy Babbit was a good sight reader.

BILL BLODGETT: Where did Dick Watson come from?

HERMAN: He came from an ad that we ran. Mrs. Kortlander hired him. She was in the office and thought that he was pretty good.

[At this point Mr. Kortlander said that he was tired of talking and would like a glass of wine thus ending the interview.]