



AMICA International

Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association

Honor Roll

See [video](#) of this Hall-Of-Fame Member

Robert Armbruster

Composer, conductor, pianist and songwriter, educated at West Philadelphia High School. He studied music with Constantin von Sternberg. He was first a concert pianist, and then a conductor, composing for radio, television and film. He joined ASCAP in 1955, and his songs include "Cuddle Up", and "High Barbaree". His works include "Western Ballet" and "Variations in Miniature on Chopsticks".

"Variations in Miniature" (a.k.a. "Chopsticks Variations") for piano and orchestra

Composed by Robert Armbruster

I had the privilege of working with this delightful man as a fellow pianist in the early '80s at an AMICA convention... 1980, I believe.

In about 1950 he had composed and arranged a tongue-in-cheek version of "Chopsticks", to be played on a radio broadcast by actress-pianist Diana Lynn, who was his niece (according to musical lore). This was a concerto-like composition with orchestral accompaniment, organized in "theme-and-variations" fashion.

He approached me at the 1979 convention, saying that he was looking for a pianist to play the reduced orchestral score on a second piano... aiming for the 1980 convention. I jumped at the chance to participate, since, in my eyes, this man was a historical icon in the radio/musical world. He was in his 80s at the time, but his mind and his fingers were still



Photograph of Robert Armbruster, taken by Molly Yeckly during her 1984 visit to his Los Angeles home.

very active and adept.

He sent me a copy of the score, reduced to a two-piano arrangement, for my perusal. It certainly was playable, but more interesting was an idea that I was germinating: At that time, I had been heavily involved in arranging Ampico piano rolls, so why not make a drafting-board arrangement of the yet-to-be-performed duet... making copies available for sale as convention souvenirs? After all... I had a whole year to complete the project.



The idea proved to be do-able, and it was great fun on my part... what an inventive mind he had! This was "ChopSticks" as it might have been written by Rachmaninoff, Cole Porter, Chopin, and some un-named Broadway show arranger.



I sent the "manuscript" roll (i.e., hand-punched) to the Malones at Playrite, requesting a run of 20 copies to be made and delivered to me at the convention. Wiser than me, John and Bill Malone instead doubled the order to 40, and we offered them for sale (to be autographed by Armbruster and me) after the performance at the final banquet (on two nested 9-foot grands!). Those rolls quickly sold out, and we took orders for about ten more, from conventioners.

Now, 25 years later, perhaps another recutting of this roll would be of interest; Richard and Janet Tonnesen here in the Dallas area have the facilities to do so, and I'd suggest that interested parties contact them or me.

So... that's my contribution to Robert Armbruster lore.

Bill Flynt
11815 Woodbridge Dr.
Dallas, TX 75243
972/644-2493 home

30 April 2005

(The following appears in THE AMICA, May 1970)

Thanks to AMICAn Phil Hill and Reporter Sam Thompson of the Southern California Chapter, I was provided with the address of Robert Armbruster, an exclusive Duo-Art recording artist whose rolls are so exquisitely smooth and polished that they bring some of the highest prices in today's auctions, despite their extreme popularity at the time of their issue and the resulting current, comparative abundance. I had asked a former AMICAn for Armbruster's address last year, but in its stead I received the intelligence that Mr. Armbruster was ashamed of the fact that he made "piano rolls" (A surprising allegation from a dealer in rolls, especially considering that live since learned Mr. Armbruster doesn't even know the dealer in question!) I mentioned this when I wrote to ask that he accept an Honorary Membership, and received the following reply:

April 15, 1970

Dear Mr. Elfers;

Thank you for your most complimentary letter and the interesting and informative literature. I had not known of the existence of your Collectors' Association. I shall be very happy to accept an Honorary Membership.

While I was at the AEolian Company I made so many records that they felt my name was too ubiquitous in their releases. It was a pretty well-kept secret, but I guess there is no harm in telling you now that if you find some rolls made by a Henri Bergman or a Waldron or Summers - they are all mine.

I am by no means ashamed of some of those performances, but I fear that I may have been fairly immature in some of them. The other names were used on some second-rate music, and if I remember they were at times pretty corny.

If you are in Los Angeles, give me a ring. I can probably fill in all the gaps in your Duo-Art information and maybe even an anecdote or two.

Thanks again for your letter, and I hope we can get together sometime soon.

Sincerely,

Robert Armbruster

For the pseudonyms, the artist added "Henri" to his first wife's maiden name of "Bergman". "Robert Summers" are his two own given names, and "Gene Waldron" was borrowed from the boyfriend of one of AEolian's secretaries. The latter two were usually type-set on the Duo-Art leader testimonial, but "Henri Bergman" was frequently signed - although not by Robert Armbruster. He doesn't know who provided the signature. Four other names were used for the compositions when they were released without the dynamic coding as 88-note "Melodee" rolls, but he can't remember what they were.

I have since called Mr. Armbruster, and have been down to Brentwood to interview him. The resulting biography and account of the Duo-Art recording procedure will appear in a subsequent bulletin. As an example of Mr. Armbruster's friendliness, kindness and good humor, I had an appointment at 1:00 o'clock. When I arrived, my watch read 1:15. I offered as casual an apology as 15 minutes warranted, and Mr. Armbruster accepted it graciously and expressed concern lest I had difficulty finding the address. About an hour later, during the interview, I read the comment he had written on a roll. I'd asked him to autograph: "To Jim Elfers, on the first day of Daylight Saving, 1970". It was only then that I realized I had been an HOUR and fifteen minutes late!

We are extremely pleased to have located Mr. Armbruster at last, and proud to number him among our distinguished Honoraries.