

WELTE COVERED - by Denis Condon

Inspired by the front cover photograph of the September 2003 AMICA bulletin (Volume 40 Number 5), I decided to photograph the Welte Mignon 'set-up' in my collection with the thought that it may interest other Amicans. I like to think that this is the complete Welte Mignon for the simple reason that it, or in reality, they play T100 red rolls, T98 green rolls and, with the movement of one lever, Licensee rolls.



At the back of the set-up pictured is a Steinway upright Model 'K', serial number 212142, which plays red rolls. Michel's Piano Atlas dates the instrument at circa 1922 and there is an interesting tale as to how it came to Australia. The original owner was Sir Norman Kater, a wealthy businessman who was one of the founders of the Myer department store chain based in Melbourne that still exists throughout Australia.

Sir Norman probably bought the piano at the Steinway showrooms in Conduit Street, London, when he visited the United Kingdom in 1924 or thereabouts for what may have been his honeymoon. It would appear that he ordered a copy of every roll in the showroom at the time, since of the 156 T100 rolls in his collection none was dated later than 1925. It is a wonderful selection of concert music and includes six dance

rolls from 1924. The piano and rolls were shipped to Sir Norman and his bride's new home in the southern highlands of New South Wales. The climate of that area may have accounted for the rolls' exceptionally good condition. Indeed many of them seemed never to have been played before I acquired the instrument.

I first came across the instrument in the early 1960s when it was listed in the Sydney Morning Herald as a 'Steinway player piano' for auction along with the by then late Sir Norman's house and its other contents. Having been told it was an ordinary player piano, I nevertheless was curious to see it and attended the auction. When I realized it was a very unusual reproducer my interest grew but I was outbid by a local dairy farmer and his wife, Joyce and Sam Airey. I introduced myself to the Aireys and kept in touch, visiting them in Fitzroy Falls occasionally, until about 15 years later the phone rang one day. It was Joyce offering me the Steinway Welte. After several years of painstaking restoration of both piano and player, with the help of Jim Nicholson, the piano stands as in the photograph and sounding magnificent.

In front of the Steinway stands a most unusual Welte vorsetzer that plays green rolls. It was found in Wales (UK) by a Sydney antique dealer and shipped to Australia in the 1970s. Having sat in the dealer's laundry for more than 10 years, it was offered to me unrestored. It seems to be about the same vintage as the Steinway upright, which makes it most unusual. By the mid '20s it appears that Welte was only making vorsetzers to order. In its austere Brazilian Rosewood case, it is a sensational machine. As can be seen in the photograph, it has a similar stack to that of the T100 and both of these players have no tracking mechanism. So beautifully engineered are they that neither of them ever mistracks.

Inspired by my ever-increasing collection of wonderful Licensee rolls, when restoring the vorsetzer I had long discussions with my friend Jim Nicholson, who is a genius when it comes to pneumatic problems, and I decided to see if we could convert the vorsetzer to a dual system. We experimented with pieces from my collection of discarded player items and succeeded with basically six Welte licensee lock valves and an Aeolian transposing bar. It was the bar that made the job fairly simple. Yes, a good deal of luck was involved but the fact that the test rolls (mine are all original) register perfectly made adjusting the two systems easy and the musical results worthwhile. It is just so fortunate that the ports in the T98 bar do the job perfectly – even the reroll is fine. The US Welte catalogue has exceptional items that are not to be found in any other collection and it has been a continuing joy to be able to play my Licensee rolls.

Postscript

For those of you with Licensee players and access to green rolls, the Green to Licensee conversion does not work in reverse. I have tried it but the Licensee tracker bar is not sympathetic to the process. Its ports are all the same size and in line, where on the green bar three ports at either end are a different size and in some cases fractionally out of line with the others.