

MECHANICAL MUSIC WORLD Issue 18 Autumn 2019

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AMBC Meeting August 18th

Our meetings are loosely themed and members encouraged to bring something along for display and discussion, so we all learn from each other. The themes on this occasion were gramophones and musical boxes, linked by automata.

At the meeting we showed a small automaton picture of dancing cats fitted with a cylinder movement. The item was bought by one of the members for a complete restoration, including a fully repaired comb, which had 10 missing treble teeth. Members had another view of this instrument when it was compared with a similar automaton example driven from the disc of a small Symphonion disc musical box. To the left is the cat automaton driven by a small key-wound cylinder movement. The movement drives a wooden disc with pins at right angle to its surface around the periphery. The pins are staggered at uneven intervals. The cat plays a violin and nods its head whilst three kittens dance to its tune with arms and legs a-swinging. Even for adults, it is an extremely amusing and rather rare item made for childish entertainment about 130 years ago. To its right is the disc musical box with its theatre-like atrium and dancing animals, this time a mother pig, a drum and her dancing piglets. The operating principle is the same, a rotating pinned disc.



Toy Gramophones and Phonographs

by Paul Baker
"Many different designs of toy and miniature gramophones were produced and marketed during the first decades of the 20th century, mostly by German manufacturers but also some other European countries.

This is a Bing Pigmyphone made in Bavaria. The transfer-printed tin plate case is 16 cms square, The photographs shows the gramophone assembled for playing and the mechanism and the



tubular support for the horn and sound-box assembly upon which it is able to rotate during play.

When the gramophone is packed away after use, the horn and soundbox fit inside the case alongside the motor together the winding key which is also placed loose inside. Note the protruding start/stop lever which protrudes through a slot in the side of the case. The internal end of the lever acts directly upon the motor's governor. Although crude, the operating lever is fairly effective in use, allowing the records to be played at their correct speed of 80 rpm (80 rpm was the standard record playing speed up



until the late 1920s) but many a child must have had much amusement by playing a record either too slowly or too fast, producing either a growling noise from the horn, or a high-pitched tone sounding somewhat like Minnie Mouse in hysterics fun for the children of long ago and a memory for one or two older members present”.

The Mikiphone by Juliet and Chris Fynes



This is not a child's toy but is ingeniously constructed to play records up to 10 ins in diameter. According to the instruction pamphlet it is a mechanical masterpiece, the smallest phonograph in the world which can be carried in the pocket "when walking or travelling so as to be able to organise an impromptu danse (sic) or entertainment". Furthermore it "can stand sea transport, the hottest climate and will never rust”.

The "Mikiphone" was invented by the Vadász brothers from Geneva and patented in 1924. They contracted with the Paillard company from Ste-Croix to produce it and around 180,000 were manufactured between 1925 and 1927. A number of these instruments have survived, so it is not very rare. What is rare however,

is the tiny needle box that was originally contained within. I was told by a specialist dealer in Rudesheim that these seldom come up for sale but when they do, they cost around 120 euros!



AMBC Auction September 2019

Many of you will remember the late Terry France. His wish was that his old friend, Ted Brown should oversee the disposal of his mechanical music collection. It was decided that the fairest way to do this, on behalf of the family, and to allow everyone an equal chance of a purchase, would be to hold an AMBC auction.

We are fortunate to have ex-Christies and Bonhams specialist Laurence Fisher amongst our membership and he readily agreed to be auctioneer on the day. Additional consignments were accepted from AMBC members, attracted by the 0% sellers' commission. Buyers were only charged a modest 10%.

The fully illustrated catalogues were sent out far and wide. All were welcome to come and bid, conditional upon joining AMBC for the rest of the year. Saturday the 14th saw both established and new members walk through the doors of The Old School with their catalogues, wearing excited faces. There were bargains to be had, but with brisk bidding and numerous bids "on the book", from as far afield as Europe and America, some of the more popular lots achieved well in excess of the estimates.

MBSI Annual Meeting by Paul Bellamy



“Ted Brown and I have been members of the Musical Box Society International (MBSI) for many years. Their annual meetings are held in various different locations and, being such a vast country, it can take almost as long to cross it as to reach its nearest state. I have used the opportunity many times to attend annual meetings and two previous centenary meetings, using them as a base for hiring a car and touring the countryside, cities and towns for a week or so extra.

Last year the meeting was held in Detroit so I flew to Chicago, hired a car and toured the country between the two cities, visiting historical civil war sites and re-enactments. This year it was held at Rockville, a suburb of

Washington. Not only was the meeting jam packed with a full itinerary of visits to major collections, there were also workshops, musical entertainment and all sorts of opportunity to socialise and be entertained. One of the many highlights was the banquet, well-named in respect of the quantity and quality of its food, followed by ragtime entertainment by a virtuoso renowned pianist. Every visitor received a unique table favor, a feature of every annual meeting. Each favor, (yes! it is the way the USA use the English language) is created and kept a mystery until opened by excited guests when delivered to the banquet table. The theme of the meeting was Ragtime and the favor comprised a beautifully crafted 30-key Manivelle, see picture, complete with a punched strip that played the Scott Joplin Weeping Willow Rag. Members now had the challenge of creating their own music using the blank strips and the hole punch provided. One member at the workshop demonstrated The Washington Post March arranged in ragtime style. The tune was originally arranged by Souza, the March King, for an essay awards competition organised by the Washington Post newspaper in 1889. There were visitors from many other countries:- Canada, Italy, France, Belgium, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, Japan, and the UK. A highlight was the mart where every variety of self-playing Instrument and associated memorabilia was available for sale.

Through the Looking glass and Glimpses of Madness by David Soulsby

David begins his tale:- “While the eyes of the world were on Normandy for the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings, I travelled to the south of the province to the city of Falaise and L' Avenue Automatiques. This is a museum that traces the history of the famous animated Parisian store window displays popular between 1920 and 1960. Having paid my 8€ entrance money I went inside to discover



the streets of Paris from an early period faithfully re-created. Included are a number of shop windows from the large Department stores of the era, such as, Galeries Lafayette and Au Printemps, each with an animated scene from a former display.

In complete contrast, on my return to the UK I travelled to the so-called MAD (Mechanical Art Design) Museum in Stratford-upon-Avon. This was opened in 2012 by Richard Simmons and now exhibits around 70 pieces of kinetic art now and Automata from contemporary artists and engineers worldwide.

The contrast between the two museums was striking, not only because of the different Periods in which the automata were built, but also the themes that they depicted. The models here were made of simple materials, wood, iron, and even pieces scavenged from everyday items. They are handcrafted, generally hand cranked or with small electric motors, no electronics. The mechanism isn't hidden away but is generally on show so that you can see wheels, cogs and cams all interacting. These give you an extra interest in the automata. The exhibits in his museum display the hallmark of a large number of present day automata, a sense of the ridiculous. One of these from Chris and Angela Margret, show three demons complete with paint pots and brushes swarming over and defacing a gallery portrait of Shakespeare”.



The Edison “Fireside” Phonograph by Paul Baker

“The front cover illustration for this issue shows a fine Edison ‘Fireside’ phonograph, another similar example having sold in the recent AMBC auction.

Introduced into the Edison range in 1909, it was designated a combination type phonograph, indeed the first Edison phonograph model specifically intended for playing the industry standard cylinder record of just over four inches in length and two and a quarter inches diameter. It had a groove pitch of 100 t.p.i. (threads per inch) and having a playing time of just over two minutes. The then newly introduced long-playing records were of the same physical size but having a fine groove of 200 t.p.i. giving a duration of around four minutes. The new records were branded the ‘Edison Amberol Record whereas the older style of record would henceforth be known as the "Edison Standard Record" to differentiate between the two types. .

Thomas Alva Edison, the great American inventor, dubbed the "Wizard of Menlo Park" had invented his phonograph or "speaking machine" as far back as 1877 but that first incarnation was a relatively crude affair when compared to later developments. That may well be true but nonetheless the world was amazed and astonished at a machine that could actually record and reproduce the human voice and indeed any other sound that was presented to it, being truly hailed as the greatest wonder of the age”

