

## MECHANICAL MUSIC WORLD Issue 21 Summer 2020

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**Auctions and the Vanishing Audience** Breker's latest Auction Report

When Henri Lioret unveiled his No. 3 Phonograph at the Trocadéro in Paris in 1897, the auditorium by all accounts was full. When Auction Team Breker sold a rare example of the weight-driven model in Cologne on 16 May 2020, the room was almost empty.

The spread of the novel coronavirus and the worldwide measures to counter it have introduced a new set of challenges to the auction industry, which depends upon personal contact and a ready access to goods faced with the restrictions of social distancing and a federal ban on public gatherings. The Cologne-based specialists in technical antiques decided against postponing their spring program and made the bold choice to move their auctions into a virtual forum instead. Uwe Breker, whose sales have built up a loyal international following, is well versed in the possibilities and occasional pitfalls of online auctions. The preview was conducted by private appointment only, with minimal contact, masks and hand sanitiser. The auction itself took place with a worldwide live video-stream on 6 online platforms but, whereas the room would usually be bustling with bidders from across Europe, the audience now consisted of staff conducting telephone bids at desks set two meters apart.



Breker's first online-only sale on 4 April, 2020 (a marathon double-bill of photographic and office antiques from the world-famous collection of Tom Russo) set the pace for a winning formula with a 96 % sold quota, running almost 11 hours. Their second virtual outing of vintage technology, toys and mechanical music, bucked the trend with some impressive results for rare and wonderful inventions. An unusual sub-section with particular relevance was a single-owner collection of Second World War spy equipment. Clandestine receivers, such as the British Whaddon MK VII paraset transceiver in metal 'cash box' casing, were developed for resistance forces in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Built not for secrecy, but display, was an impressive ensemble of mechanical music instruments. The auction included fine examples of pneumatic and stringed instruments, complex musical boxes, singing birds, imposing clocks and musical timepieces.

## The Making of a Musical Disc rare as a Hen's tooth by Paul Bellamy



"This may seem to be a ridiculous title for an article but, in this case, it is not. In fact, there is no better description to explain what follows. Somewhere in the non-self-playing instrument world were two people bent on a mission. One was a film director and the other a musician. The director's sixth feature film was to be a poignant sort of ghost story, based on a mother, two daughters and a musical box - a nostalgic yet troubled reflection of childhood memory. The script of the story and its location, based in a large old house on the Isle of Wight, was well in hand but two things were missing; one was the music and the other the self-playing musical instruments to perform the music. The theme required a player piano and a musical box.

The film director, Jon Sanders, started to make enquiries, after a rather tortuous route, landed up as a telephone call with a question: "Can a musical box be programmed to play a piece of music?" Of course, the answers had to be both yes

and no, plus another question in response: "What type of musical box?" Jon's friend and long-time collaborator Douglas Finch, a Canadian/British concert pianist, composer and improviser, had the task of creating the musical score. On the basis of 'never say never,' the result was that both were eager to visit me and hear a number of different cylinder and disc musical boxes. All problems have a number of possible solutions. Finding a solution to this one, though, seemed to be about as impossible as finding a needle in a haystack? No, in this case finding a hen's tooth".....

## Found in a Cellar by Don Busby

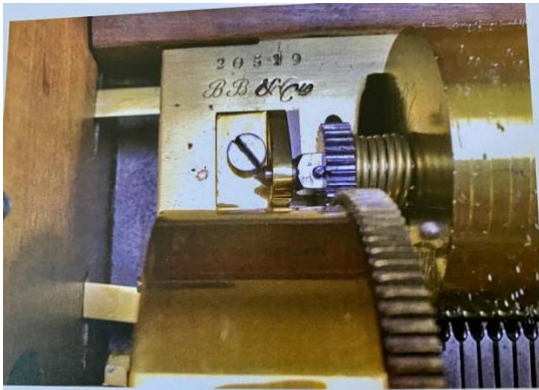
Don begins:- *"This might be a useful guide when you are designing and fitting the comb to the bed plate of a musical box. It was given to my cousin David by the new owner of a house he was helping to renovate, having been found in the cellar. So remarked Robert Ducat-Brown as he handed over a rusting bed plate and comb at a society meeting. It was carried home with gratitude and, on checking the tuning of the comb, it was found to have a nice tone.*

*What a shame that this old movement was in such a poor state: was it really at the end of its life? Repairs effected to date are described and suggestions are given for further work to complete its rejuvenation.*

In between work on his own bespoke musical box, the author cleaned up the old bed plate and began repairs to the comb. On learning of this Robert gave him the movement's old cylinder, complete with great wheel, drive pinion, compression spring and tune-change snail. He had already melted out cylinder cement and dissolved the pins with acid to use the bare cylinder for demonstrations of pinning. The cylinder is drilled for 8 airs and the comb has 77 teeth at 3.5 mm centres. This old machine was ideal for the author to practice mending a vintage box, knowing that he could not make its condition any worse.

Now, in 2019, it is in a reasonable state of repair and plays 8 tunes of which only 3 titles can be guessed at pending tuning of the comb. Airs are currently played through a hand-turned gear train as the assembly is still short of a spring drive and governor. Gear train and supporting aluminium frame will be removed to allow these components to be fitted once they have been sourced". ....





**Serial number near end cap**

### **Oh, Ye Spiers of Oxford** Joseph Berman

The musical box shown in this article was in my possession for almost five years before I discovered its story. The tale is interesting, mysterious in some ways, yet it provides insight into the development of the musical box "business" in England and one quite important businessman in Oxford. This is a complex tale, with some conjecture but much factual information about Richard Spiers. His business model seems to have provided an unusual path for the young musical box industry, as boxes were quickly moving into homes around Europe.

I purchased it online from a friend's life-long, collection of stunning instruments. As the auction moved closer to its close — and I moved onto items I felt I could "win", something about this instrument seemed familiar. It reminded me of my first musical box, an 1840s Ducommun-Girod, which I still prize. My purchase had a 2" in diameter, 11" cylinder and a 103 tooth comb in a plain box, measuring approximately H 5½, L 18 ½, and D 6 ½. The serial number, 20519 was stamped in the left end of the bedplate, scratched on the left cylinder end cap, and written on the bottom of the box.....

### **The Life and Times of Richard Spiers** by Juliet Fynes

Juliet's article is based on her project devoted to the life of Richard James Spiers:- "the son of a hairdresser, was born in Oxford in 1806. At the age of 21, and a hairdresser like his father, he was matriculated at the University of Oxford as a "privileged person". Matriculation is a ceremony undergone by students to confer membership of the university. Up until the mid-nineteenth century this was extended to certain tradesmen, especially those of use to the university such as booksellers, to give them protected status from the city's jurisdiction and the obligations imposed on freemen. This was very significant at this time as otherwise only freemen could enter into business within the city.



Richard was clearly an ambitious and energetic young man. In 1834 he took possession of the premises at 102

High Street, running it as a stationery and fancy goods shop and later branching out into china and glass. After his wedding in 1837, and a 3½ month honeymoon, he and his wife took up residence above the shop. The business prospered and his prestige in the city grew. In 1842 he and his growing family moved into a substantial town house elsewhere in the city.

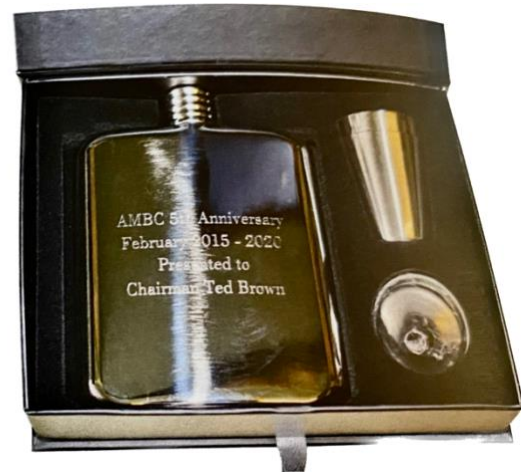
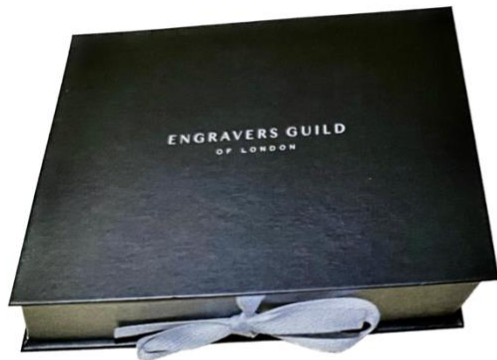
The shop sold all number of fancy goods and gifts, including musical boxes, which he hired out as well as selling. The shop was particularly noted for papier-mâché souvenirs. The blanks were probably sourced from producers in the West Midlands, the centre of papier-mâché manufacture in Britain. They would have been painted by his employees, some of whom lived above the shop, said to number 30 at this time. They were 'ornamented with views of every college & public building in Oxford', making them very popular with students and visitors to the town who could also order

bespoke designs of their coats of arms or other decoration. There are two Spiers papier-mâché hand screens in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

This success meant Spiers could extend the shop to include 103 High Street around 1851 and soon after another shop in the Cornmarket” .....

### **A presentation to the Chairman Postponed**

February marked an important anniversary for AMBC - our 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. The AGM in April was to have been a celebration of this milestone and include a presentation to our chairman, Ted. He inspired the formation of the Association, his home has been our headquarters, his hospitality and extensive collection the backbone of our meetings and many a magazine article. So this was to be a fitting



occasion to acknowledge the membership's appreciation of his leadership. We commissioned an engraved hip flask to be presented, but sadly it was not to be. The intervention of the coronavirus pandemic caused the cancellation of this and an unknown number of future meetings. As we didn't want to wait indefinitely for Ted to receive this well deserved award we had it delivered to him courtesy of Royal Mail. He was pleased and touched by the gesture, even though it was somewhat lacking in ceremony. .

When we are next able to meet we will set up an appropriate photo opportunity. In the words of the Queen, on the occasion of her VE Day address to the nation, and in the words borrowed from Vera Lynn's wartime song we WILL meet again.

In the meantime take care, stay safe and keep in touch.

### **Musical Trivets by Juliet Fynes**



Juliet describes some of her musical teapot stands:- “These attractive novelties were made during the Art Nouveau period. They consisted of a square carved wooden frame, deep enough to house a small musical movement, on four small bun feet to accommodate the winder underneath. The on-off control projects from one side and the surface is finished with an inset ceramic tile. The movements were only made by Thibouville-Lamy and typically played from one to four airs, though a superior example might have as many as six. The T-L bargain basement model, costing 9 francs, had one air played on a 19-tooth comb. An example playing two airs on a 25-tooth comb could be had for 13 francs, or with a higher quality enamelled tile, for 15 francs.” ....

### Auguste L'Épée and P.H.Paur by Paul Bellamy

Paul speculates on another early cylinder box:- "One of the hardest things to do is to find the actual maker of a musical box when there is very little to go on. Sometimes there are sufficient clues to make an educated guess; otherwise it is just that - a guess! An early key-wind 4-air musical box with very well arranged airs became the subject of close scrutiny. Some interesting observations seemed to



point to an early but unidentified maker. It has a plain walnut case, early wire hinges that were as perfect as the day they were made, a fixed end to the box with its three protruding control levers, thus probably earlier than the types with a hinged end flap. The controls are standard for the period: tune change, stop/start and instant stop, plus a hole for the key. The governor has a fixed small jewel. There are few makers whose serial numbers would fit an estimated date for this early movement, circa 1830s serial 2890. We can almost certainly discount Nicole and Henri Lecoultre leaving Ducommun and L'Épée as possible makers. The movement is mounted

front and back by two cheese-head screws set on small brass washers, all original. The small countersunk wood screw is a later addition, securing the soundboard the single piece comb has 96 teeth for a notional 6-inch long cylinder, 11/8 inch diameter. The governor gears are a simple, robust, two-step reduction. The bay leaf (endless drive gear) is of early design, comprising a standard width large gear wheel with about 30 teeth, the teeth taper in thickness towards the tip." ....

Paul continues to unravel more details and background to this interesting piece.

### Automata that don't move by David Soulsby

David spent a rainy afternoon at the V&A Childhood Museum checking out the collection of automata



toys on display. "There is a complete area entitled "Moving Toys Springs and Cogs" but not unsurprisingly I guess, not a single one moved. I was expecting, at least, a video showing the toys being put through their paces. Maybe a curator showing off the least fragile exhibits to the public at certain times - but there was nothing! This is in stark contrast to exhibitions of modern automata that can be seen in action; interacting via push button motors or turning handles. Putting my disappointment to one side, and after a welcome cup of coffee and a brief trawl through the V&A database on my mobile phone for clues; I began my tour of the collection.

There are several Jack-in-the-Boxes on display. One of the oldest is from Germany, made in the mid nineteenth century. The lid of the box has a wired hinge and inside the figure of a grinning woman in a blue fabric dress is mounted on a spring. Strangely her wooden painted hands are on the wrong arms. Any child flipping this catch would surely have been scared stiff. One of the many dolls in this display is the "Autoperipatetikos", an automatic walking model, (that hadn't taken a step for some time) made in the USA in 1862 by Martin & Runyon. The body is conically shaped cardboard and wood containing the clockwork mechanism, and the head is of composition (glue and sawdust) with moulded hair. It is displayed alongside the original box with the instructions on how to wind it up and make it *walk*." .....

....."Feeling somewhat down, because of the motionless exhibits I had just seen I headed towards the exit. On my way out I passed a mournful group of Sweeney Todd, marionettes, from 1938, which seemed to cry out for their puppet master to return and pull them back into life. I have since contacted the museum and they unfortunately do not have plans to include demonstrations or video presentations for the moving toys, that stubbornly refuse to do so."



At the end of the show  
the puppets were  
left motionless  
and their  
puppeteer  
was gone.

Sweeney Todd puppets, 1938-1945  
Marionettes made in England by J. D. Bickerton. The characters  
of Sweeney Todd, Mrs Lovell, Captain Ingwersen and the Barber's  
Boy were all used to tell this gruesome story.