

MECHANICAL MUSIC WORLD ISSUE 27 WINTER 2021/22

An Unusual Revolver Music Box by Paul Bellamy

Paul begins his article on this unusual box as follows:- "In 2021, Gorrings auction house of Lewes, England, listed a musical box described as a revolver. Nothing to do with firearms but a term used for a type of musical box that had interchangeable cylinders. It was very different from all other types ever recorded and maybe the only surviving example. The types and styles of music that it was programmed to play are largely unknown. 'Revolvers' had a carousel that carried three or more cylinders that could be rotated into and out of the bedplate by means of the carousel. Most interchangeable musical boxes kept spare cylinders in a cabinet. This carousel carried not just the cylinder but also its comb, each mounted on a separate mini-bedplate.

I had hoped to go to the pre-auction viewing to see and hear the instrument but was scheduled for a Covid-19 test followed by three days self isolation with a cataract operation on the auction day. All very frustrating!

After the auction, our AMBC editors David and Lesley Evans came to my rescue. David alerted me to the fact that the website auction catalogue had fine detailed photographs and he observed that each revolver had a comb arrangement. Weeks went by as I struggled to get my surviving short sighted eye and my new long sighted eye with its plastic lens to work in unison. With some difficulty I could see that David was right. All comb layouts were designed to produce a different type of



musical arrangement. But why and what style of musical arrangement? Some of the earliest examples of standard musical boxes with fixed cylinders had combs made to produce loud and soft music called Forte-Piano. The first of these had a single comb with cylinder pins set to different heights to give the loud and soft effect. Expensive and difficult to make, they were soon superseded by the two comb Forte-Piano arrangement, one comb playing Forte and the other comb, with teeth set to give less tooth lift for Piano. The Forte-Piano types appeared about the early to mid 1840s". This article is a visual assessment of this remarkable and possibly unique survivor of the late 1800's.



Repairing A Simple Toy Automaton by Ted Brown and Paul Bellamy

"Perhaps the title of this article should be: 'A rather shattering experience' because that is exactly what happened to a novelty child's toy that was a treasured childhood memory by its owner. That owner happened to contact an AMBC member and it duly arrived for inspection by Ted Brown with the hope of repair. The Novelty shown assembled after restoration was never intended to be taken apart. Even for avid collectors of antique musical boxes and automata, it was easy to understand how a grown-up would yearn to see their childhood toy spring to life to play and dance again. The maker of the automaton is unknown but

appears to be of Swiss or Tyrolean ancestry with musical movements provided by Gueissaz of Switzerland."

Taking the case apart meant prising away the main platform with its little band of players. It was later replaced using two roundhead brass screws so that it could be taken apart, if necessary, in the future. The dancing platform is a thin sheet of glass that was also glued in position. Fortunately, it was separated without breakage but some of its brown paint on the underside needed to be retouched. Most

of the paints supplied in art shops match a pre-determined colour scale. This was the case with some brown Rowney oil paint, which was a perfect match. The base of the movement was the cast alloy called pot metal. It is notoriously unstable but cheap; so many makers would use the material in the knowledge that it should outlast the expected life of any toy! Unfortunately this toy had outlasted the maker's expectations and the bedplate now lay in ruins"....

Why not read the full article in this issue to follow the painstaking repair of this toy?

SAS Auction Highlights, Property of the late Graham Webb by Christopher Fynes

SAS (Special Auction Services) is an auction house situated in large premises on a trading estate in Newbury, Berkshire. They hold several specialist auctions each month, including the occasional sale devoted to mechanical music.

The auction catalogue included a brief but helpful description of Graham Webb's life:

"Graham Webb (1930-2005) was born in Oxford but moved to London at the start of the War. By the end of the war, he was working for a roofing contractor, then, after serving in the Royal Navy, as a steward on an ocean liner. A job in the auction department of Whiteleys (many department stores held auctions at that time) led to working for an antiques dealer, selling fireplaces removed from bombed-out houses.

It was in 1963 that he opened his own shop in the Portobello Road, and there he discovered, by a chance purchase, a stack of musical boxes which he quickly sold at a useful profit, that this was a promising line, and he became the first specialist dealer in mechanical music. His shop was a hub for the early members of the Musical Box Society of Great Britain, and his Cylinder and Disc Musical Box Handbooks became standard works. He eventually left London for Yorkshire but returned south a few years later to Brighton where he opened another shop which he retained until retirement. This article has photographs and detailed descriptions of items from his collection to be auctioned including :-

Lot 141 A rare key-wind overture box by François Nicole.

Lot 153 Another rare box, circa 1822/25 also by Nicole

Lot 141 A key-wind mandolin musical box by Bellini, Julienne, Donizetti and Salas

Lot 145 A two-air snuffbox by F.Lecoultrre reaching £1900

Lot 166 An F.Nicole snuffbox selling for £2300



A Trip through Musical Box Time by Paul Bellamy

Paul poses the following question; "The cylinder musical box was a masterpiece of technical innovation but was it ever invented, If so, by whom?"

He provides his own opinion as to whether Antoine Favre-Salomon was the inventor, or was 'plucking a tuned comb by means of steel pins on a rotating brass cylinder', just an adaptation of existing practice, not an invention.

J Thomas Rhamstine - Who? Invented What? By David Evans

David considers:- "In the 1920's, radio receivers consisted of a box - using mahogany, walnut or just plain pine or deal using external batteries to power it and a separate loudspeaker. This could be a horn type up to about mid-1925, when speakers in wood cabinets started to appear. The quality of reproduction was likened to a "headphone in a bucket" at the time, and it was some years before anything resembling 'Hi-Fi' appeared. One device, however was advertised from July 1924 which allowed reproduction through your gramophone, using its horn to reproduce the radio signal. By that time some of the more adventurous gramophone manufacturers were producing machines that sounded quite reasonable. In 1919 Henry Seymour had a book called 'The Reproduction of Sound', giving information about the experiments he had been conducting on improvements in the gramophone as it then existed. By 1923 Seymour had been selling components of his own design to

private individuals and small-scale manufacturers such as Vesper and machines using his system had greatly improved sound. His counter-balanced tone arms, sound boxes and Ebonite horns became popular with gramophiles. Then in July 1924 along came J Thomas Rhamstine with a new type of radio reproducer. It basically consisted of a diaphragm in a small metal box that you could place upon your (stationary) gramophone turntable and place the needle of your soundbox in a slot on the top, thus using the acoustic properties of the gramophone to enhance the performance of your radio. Whether or not the device was ever used with a Seymour machine is not known!"

David continues to describe inventions by Rhamstine with reproductions of articles from magazines of the time.

