

# THE FUTURE OF MECHANICAL MUSIC

Since this question is again making the rounds on the MMD (Mechanical Music Digest) and has made the rounds about every year, I thought I would weigh in with a completely different take on the subject.

The main worry seems to be that young people don't seem to be interested in these (soon to be 100 years old) ancient instruments. As a matter of fact, they don't seem to be interested in anything mechanical at all. It has to be electronic and use 5-7 strings to attract their eye. What's wrong with this picture?

The complaint has been from owners of these instruments who take their machines to a mall, a park, or an exposition of some sort, only to be ignored by hoards of youngsters thronging by without even a curious glance at this old player piano playing away. That means, to them, that the modern generation isn't interested. That's funny because I have never, ever demonstrated SOFI to youngsters who ignored her. Matter of fact, they had to select their own tunes, they didn't want to leave, and they were so excited that every one of them old enough to have an idea, said she ought to be in a museum. Of course, I stoutly disagreed. She is greatly loved by all, including the kid with the bolt-stretching music pulsating from every gap in his old car.

When they saw and heard my reproducing grand they asked where a person could get one, how much they cost, how hard are they to restore, and all the pertinent details. It just didn't sound to me like they could care less. Just the opposite. And when the knowledgeable ones compared what they heard in several piano stores which sell the CD player pianos, versus what they heard in my living room, they all said there was no comparison. To me, that's an avid interest— to notice a difference. And when I told them that the new CD pianos are not designed to play safely, continuously at the full power levels a reproducer can easily manage all day long or for decades, and that it keeps its value, they were delighted. So, what's the problem? Simple.

If I loaded my upright player piano into a trailer and took it down to the mall to play it for everybody, it wouldn't get any interest, either. First, it isn't a large enough attraction to warrant parents stopping for 20 minutes and listening with their children in hand. Second, it's completely out of place, unless there are several other things similar in the same area and a common motif or theme celebrating things old and quaint, or music of yesteryear, or something like that. It should be a celebration of something, if not just old fashioned snacks like popcorn wagons and candy apples. Otherwise, it's a duck out of water. Patrons came to the mall to do their business and they don't have time to join in. So it isn't as though they wouldn't love it. You are just expecting them to drop their friends, family, business, and become mesmerized at the ancient player displayed. You are asking too much and judging too quickly.

It isn't the "thing" that's uninteresting, at all. It's the presentation of the thing. True, it can be the meat and potatoes of your personal entertainment, but presently these kids are looking strictly for the dessert. It wasn't the right time or place, and it definitely wasn't done in the right way.

You know, Hollywood doesn't stand for much, nowadays, but what it's always been good at is to generate interest by framing a subject in such a way that it's the only thing in the spotlight and the only thing that would ever be of interest in that setting. They wouldn't waste such a good

thing as we have by catching people off guard in the wrong way. All you bring on yourselves by doing so is criticism.

In addition to presentation, I have another more cryptic comment and that is; I don't want everybody to like mechanical musical instruments. As a matter of fact, I feel gratified that a very small minority of the population seeks to collect them, or to own one. To me, there is no better proof of their value than that!

An old upright pumping player piano in excellent condition and easy to play is the happiest machine that man ever invented. It's a hands-down, no contest flat statement that I make and as obvious a claim as was ever stated. Now if only a few people want one but those who own them don't know what they'd do without it, then these old instruments are being spared and protected by the people who know their true worth and inestimable family value. You cannot put any price on it.

The value of an old pump player is not its monetary value (although that is considerable) but the power it has to entertain, comfort, and draw people of all kinds closer together and get them to sing, pump, and enjoy something they've never done before. But it's more than that. It's something one doesn't get tired of. You get a strong yearning to hear this or that roll, to hear your piano, and to sing a few songs and so without anybody else around, you sit down and begin to play and suddenly you are seeing and hearing your day take on a new color. They just have the ability to change one's mood from pooped to peppy, from gloom to glistening, from apathetic to amused.

Anything with such a powerful intrinsic value cannot be judged by the fascination of preoccupied passers-by. It is a basic force in our lives and our culture that waxes and wanes in overall interest, but cannot be tossed like last year's rock culture. If you own a player piano, you own far more than an artifact. You own a basic principle of nature. Principles are quite often ignored too, but never go down in value. It's a commentary against pop culture and not the principle of the thing.

I'm glad that the culture, by and large, doesn't seek to own a player piano, because if they did, the really good ones would be relegated to the scrap heap as the new el-cheapo knock-off junkers began to replace them (as happened in the 50's), and what we'd end up with is a bad taste in our mouths. So rejoice! Appreciate the fact that MOST people don't want one! That's the best recommendation I could ever have.

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