

ORIGINALITY VERSUS E-ROLL MEDIA

By Craig Brougher

This subject has been discussed in the MMD recently, and there was a variety of comments regarding it— both pro and con. It was entitled, “Converting Instruments To Play Different Media.” *Different* meaning, electronic MIDI files. What it seemed to lack overall was the balanced viewpoint. Not that I could not agree with either point of view, but in a discussion like this, the reader is left on the fence without a good balanced approach to anything. It just isn't possible to get a solid frame of mind from reading such diverse comments. Let's think about what has been said, briefly, and what would possibly be a wise position to view it from.

When we speak of “Media” in pneumatic or mechanical automatic musical instruments, we are speaking about the method we use to get the musical information into the piano. In most cases, that method was originally a paper roll. There were other ways, of course, but a long time ago they were using mechanical “firmware” (as we would term it today) to get the music into the machine. That's all part of *originality*. Today in the computer age, we now have the option with one limited production product to install a completely hidden, unobtrusive and non-invasive device into the new tubing of a restored pneumatic player (or into the wiring of an original electric player) that allow it to be alternatively played by computer. So this actually is the subject. There is no other device to my knowledge that could be considered at this writing, except for hurdy-gurdys and park organs which have been played this way now for many years.

Without a doubt, paper rolls (for the vast majority) are a part of the mystique and fun of player pianos of all kinds, and they should never be without them. It's the paper rolls that carry the words to the music, and let you watch a physical representation of the music as it is played. The first criteria of any pneumatic player piano or reproducer must be that it can play rolls and that its performance playing rolls is as good or better than it was originally from the factory itself! If the player cannot any longer play rolls instantly without mechanical modification, then half the fun is lost! And if a secondary media in any way impedes the performance or interferes with the rolls, then it is definitely a “trade-off,” making it a bad choice from the start. I don't endorse or recommend anything like that.

When we stop and ask ourselves, “What is the fun thing about a player that nothing else can match,” the answer is immediate: “I can walk up to my piano at any time, put on a roll and it's instant. I don't wait 5 minutes to “boot up.” I don't bring up hundreds or thousands of titles to pick one. And I don't have to wonder what the words are (when I buy word rolls). My reward is instant, live, powerful, richly chorded music or live classical music that fills the home at my command. It is as different from pre-recorded audio through speakers as night and day. So when rolls stop coming, player pianos are eventually going to stop playing, too. The player industry is based on a steady supply of paper rolls (firmware), and no electronic media (software) is going to ultimately save it. On the other hand, the more players playing again with software, the more people are going to hear and see them, want one too, and play them with paper rolls.

That said, let's talk about electronic media interfaced to player pianos. One person compared replacing the paper roll with removing the engine out of an old Tucker automobile and replacing it with a new one. That didn't take into consideration the fact that only if the original Tucker engine was designed to be repeatedly swapped out with many others does it begin to apply. The media doesn't relate to the engine of anything, frankly. I don't relate to that analogy but I might understand the thought— IF it required major surgery to ever use a paper roll in the player piano again.

Any modification of an original instrument *supposedly* detracts from its original value. Antique shops warn people not to refinish the instrument—"It's more valuable with the original finish." Well of course it is-- to them! The truth is, it shouldn't be and isn't. (Many Antique shops used to be called Junk shops, too.)

The market determines the value for collectors and single instrument owners alike. We discover that without exception restoring the instrument vastly increases its value, which then continues to rise (unlike a new instrument) but to do so many changes from original must be made. Most people aren't even aware of that fact. For instance, *not one "original quality" material or supply is left, today*.

We use totally different kinds of rubber, cloth, hose, and leather. Junk in a few cases that would be tossed out the back door of original factories, is often boasted about as being "like the original." And today some rebuilders are using rubber coated pneumatic cloth that doesn't last much longer than 10 years in a home environment with just occasional use, and even though it's not much good, they use only that because it's just like "original." The point here is— originality is impossible in any case— especially short-lived goods— and as rolls get brittle and tear up, the boxes come apart and the labels fall off, the flanges get broken, or they rust out and tear up the roll themselves, what good is the piano anymore? If player rolls are "original equipment" then original player rolls are fine but what about new rolls? Buy a NEW ROLL? Gasp! That's not original equipment. What will the purist owner tell you when you want to hear the instrument play? *"I insisted on strict originality. Trust me, it plays perfectly, but I can't afford to play my last surviving roll on it, for fear it will disintegrate. I'm preserving it in my freezer and it will go with the piano when it's sold."* Obviously, rolls aren't equipment and new paper is better because it's more reliable. That said then— rolls, old or new, are equally acceptable to play the piano with.

Now let's ask ourselves, having a totally restored instrument and 50-100 barely surviving rolls, all of which are very brittle, "Should we 'destroy' originality by adding an electronic media capability to an original player?" Well, let's see what is involved.

If all I do is "T" into its newly replaced tubing and without any modification of its original equipment add some electrical valves— none of which requires permanent modification of anything in the original equipment but now I can play either MIDI files of rolls, or my own rolls themselves, then *how have I violated the pristine, purist originality of the instrument, itself?* I have already violated its pristine originality by restoring the instrument! I could not have more completely removed every last vestige of mechanical originality than by removing every piece of

original working material in that action! It is now totally different than it used to be, and even though I did my best to replace with similar materials, the materials, except for felt, glue, and shellac, are all different, today. But you know what? The darn thing plays again, and it's gorgeous! It's going to last for many decades, too.

So let's get a bit of balance about restorations and what we have left when we restore them. We use the best materials and supplies available, and test them ourselves if we are conscientious. But industrial pre-stretched and staked leather is no longer available. The registered herds of Scottish sheep raised specifically for the .005-.007" thick pouch leather (pneumatic leather) no longer exist. Natural rubber is no longer used in its original recipes. Rubber coated goods are totally different today than they used to be, but in some cases, just as good or better in some aspects. Pneumatic cloth of the cotton/rubber variety is presently not very good stuff, and the nylon/polyurethane cloth has mold release on it, preventing it from being securely glued (unless you know what to do and take the right measures).

The best player is the one that plays the best, the strongest, and the longest. Why? Because player piano value is totally intrinsic. If this was not the fact, then the instrument would be at its most valuable when no one had yet touched it! That was when it still had its old, blackened, alligatored look and everything inside was still dark with coal smoke. Since the truth is just the opposite, then the better a piano is restored and the better it looks the more valuable it is. And it's value depends on two things— how it looks, and how it plays. Add an electronic interface to play many of the rolls you would never find again (nor have room for if you did) and what have you done to it? You have improved its worth by adding to its intrinsic value, without taking anything away. Its really pretty simple. You've made no lasting modification or change to its basic design.

Harkening back to a statement I made earlier, that no electronic media is going to save pneumatic players, I think that's true. I also think it's true that just as a steady supply of e-rolls are going to keep a few certain players running for many years, the fact that they are heard and enjoyed will keep enthusiasm for player rolls rolling along at a new high degree of interest for the majority who don't need one.

I do think that improvements can be made in new rolls, possibly by adding words to them all, educational notated rolls too, even picture rolls, and new arrangements. But the paper roll will always justify the pneumatic player piano and electronic media together, and the new libraries of e-rolls will create a market for a (relatively) small number of owners of those instruments. Neither the paper roll or the E-Roll will supplant the other. They are not direct competition because they are a different media, with a different intent-- interactive versus indirect operation. Resales of players with the E-Roll player added are worth more than they would be without the E-Roll player installed. Few collectors, regardless how picky they are, once they hear one will ever complain that their piano can now play thousands of rolls instead of dozens. Why? Because nothing has been fundamentally converted from originality.

So—where's the beef?