## Spark #1.14 - A Wondrous Thing

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- ... the Internet. . .

I read DAC Crowell's article here at creative nth about an old "record" player he procured, and he noted that these records were the popular hits at the time, and none of them are remembered or re-released. As popular as they were at the time, they are crumbling into the dustbin of history.

My father was born in 1926. I was born in 1958. My daughter was born in 1997. When my father was 10, in 1936, recorded music had been around for barely 20 years, and given the instability of the early platforms and the meager quality of playback, one could make a case for more like 15 years. I have rereleases of some early recordings- on both CD and vinyl LP. The earliest recording I have is from 1904. The record is a vinyl re-release from the 1970s. Technically there were no real recording facilities in 1903, but an obscure Swiss inventor, Edwin Welte, with more money than Croesus decided to develop a special kind of player piano that would record a performance; somewhat like a MIDI recorder does today.

There was a tray of mercury under the keys, and each key had an electrode. The more contact with the mercury, the more current passed through, and the stronger the signal, thusly capturing nuances of the performance that were otherwise unavailable to other player pianos. The information was recorded on a seismograph like device, and then the information was cut out into a special piano roll. This roll was placed in a device called a Vorsetzer, which, as its name implies, sits in front of a piano and has a wooden finger for each key. It would literally "play" the piano, and had much more dynamics and accuracy than other piano roll systems.

Welte then invited some piano players who were famous at the time- like Debussy, Ravel, Hoffmann, and other notables over to his place to play into his recording machine, the special tray of mercury modified Bosendorfer electrified grand piano. Many Vorsetzer rolls were cut, and at the time it was considered a major (if terrifically expensive) technological advance. It was greater than most people think, as there wasn't a suitable replacement for it until the 1980s and the development of the MIDI specification.P But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

After the development of the Vorsetzer, recording and playback devices grew more popular, and soon the player piano model, of musical reproduction, and the Welte Vorsetzer with it, fell into disuse along with other methods of mechanical musical performance. By WW2, it was all but forgotten. The Vorsetzer players were, for the most part, blown to tiny flinders by the Allied bombing raids of 1944 1945. A few wrecked examples were pulled from bombed out buildings, refurbished and set up to play. The problem was, there were no rolls left for them to play, and in the mid 1960s, the call went out around the world for people who might have Vorsetzer rolls to please contact certain persons in (then) West Germany.

A fellow in Arizona who received a classical music newsletter happened to read this and thought of his neighbor, a veteran of WW2 who had come home from the war with a trunk of piano rolls. This veteran had consulted him back in the 1950s about these rolls he had pillaged/saved from some smoldering wreck of a house. They didn't fit his player piano, and furthermore, the punch holes didn't make a lick of sense compared to the highly quantised and non-dynamic piano rolls he had been using previously. Not being able to make heads or tails of them at that time, they packed them back into the trunk and stashed them away in the veteran's attic. Now informed of the search from West Germany, the vet looked at these rolls and found that indeed - he had squirreled away dozens of Vorsetzer rolls! The rest was academic as to how they made their way onto vinyl.

By today's standards, the Welte Vorsetzer playing sounds stilted and unnatural, but at the time it was a major advancement in musical playback systems. I have a recording of it on vinyl (the 19th century piano prodigy, Josef Hoffmann, playing Shubert, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn), and another recording (of Ravel playing his own material) on CD.

Josef Hoffmann, to my knowledge, was never otherwise recorded- he was middle aged at this recording and was quite elderly by the time more modern sound recording techniques were developed in the 1920s. This rare vinyl record is now the only material fact of his brilliant career we have left.

Now- think of it- put yourself in his place- you have spent your entire life thrilling the world with your work, but when you die- nothing left. That was the magical dedication of the player for thousands of years- to present a moment of aesthetic grace, an evanescent glory of the instant, an immediate experiential manifestation of a Muse- that was the tragic yet heroic beauty of the musician and music itself. You dedicated your life to be forgotten, like scrawling obscure beautiful sigils in water-everything instantly disappearing, and only held against time in the memory of the audient.

Today we think "HA! That'll never happen again! Not with recordings!"

But it is, and it is far more tragic than ever before. The arrival of the modern archetype, the Mechanical Man and his necessary compatriot, the Recording Angel, permitted the capturing of the moment, of the musical experience, into matter. Quickly, people misinterpreted the Angel's gift, and saw the recording as a gateway to immortality- so much so, a record of music was included on the Voyager spacecraft as it hurtles its way through unimaginable millennia of darkness and silence.

But back on earth, things are not so pristine and timeless- innovation is ceaseless and with it comes the voiceless anonymity so palpably, existentially true for musicians for so many previous centuries. This anonymity is arriving by means of the very tools of immortality, and it was pointed at in DAC Crowell's article about his ancient record player.

Players in the 1920s were recorded, but the tradition of music as existing solely in the form of experiential performance was still quite vital. It started to die out in the 1960s with the professionalisation and perfecting of the music-recording studio. One of its first victims was the classical keyboard player and composer Glenn Gould, who stopped performing altogether for the sake

of making recordings back in the mid 1960s. Soon, as I discussed recently, recordings only existed as recordings- no performance was possible except insofar as one played the recording on a record player or tape deck.

This was the victory of the New Archetypes- the Mechanical Man and the Recording Angel. It is the unspoken assumption of electronic music- that recordings are equivalent to performance. Unfortunately, due to the nature of recorded sound, it is subject to shifts in technology, much of it is being lost. Every day, more vinyl records make their way to the landfill. Everyday, CDs make their way to the landfill. And the CD technology is even more tragic- when they become defective they are no longer playable. And it is just a matter of time before the very basic standards of digital playback change, instantly rendering a generation of recordings obsolete and eventually, anonymous.

To make this project worthwhile, to make the efforts of millions of musicians something more than just background filler, the ignorable soundtrack to unreflected and unreflecting lives of billions of people, a re-centering is required on the part of both musicians and listeners. Musicians need to take their work more seriously- even when having a jest- they need to heed Polyhymnia's authority, because her tutelage results in a richer and more meaningful existence for both performer and audient. At the same time, Euterpe's call must also be heard and lived. Since the Recording Angel cannot provide immortality, the eternal must be seen in the magic of the instant, joyfully and physically accepted and expressed.

And this brings me to where I started- my dad was born in 1926. I was born in 1958, and my daughter in 1997. Fifty years before her birth was 1947, big band music was dying and the recent invention of the romantic crooner (thanks to Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra) was sweeping the charts. Fifty years before 1958, there was the Welte Vorsetzer, which barely qualifies as a recorder/player. Fifty years before 1926 was 1876, and music lay almost exclusively in the hands of performers.

My daughter will inherit several thousand records. Will she ever listen to them all? Will anyone? If not, then the music has died- for just as written music is dead if no one plays it, so too recorded music is dead if no one plays the recording. Like her grandparents, and me she will grow up with recorded music as a given. Her great grandparents, born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, did not grow up with recorded music- records were something they came to in middle age and viewed with general indifference.

My wife had a great aunt who passed on a few years ago at the age of 103. She was born in 1893. She got a job at the local railroad in 1924 and worked there for twenty years and retired in 1944. She collected a pension for more than 60 years. She didn't care much for "today's music". She didn't and couldn't understand it. I remember trying to explain to her how a computer worked. It was so completely over her head, I might as well as have been explaining quantum theory to Cleopatra. She was just a farm girl from Iowa, and was raised in the age of the barbershop quartet she could vividly remember a time before automobiles.<sup>b</sup> She left behind no record collection. Her life had no soundtrack.

I'm not going to bother stepping into the fray as to whether or not life is better with a soundtrack or not - I think there are benefits to both worlds but in the context of this woman's life, music, real music, was performative. It was something people did by forgotten players. As DAC Crowell pointed out, even the recorded ones are forgotten, and what constitutes their memory- the material object of their recordings- are soon consigned to the landfill, and also forgotten. Furthermore, it only takes a slight tweaking of technology to render an entire generation of music obsolete, and again- desitned for the landfill. For instance, if the CD Redbook standard changed from 44.1kHz sampling to 48kHz- (much less 96kHz) bingo- all gone. Dead as a doornail. Landfill. Sure CD players will have an interim stage wehre they'll play different sampling frequencies. Just like turntables could play 78s‰ but how long did that last? My turntable- a fine SOTA Comet- only plays 45 and 33rpm records. Soon enough, CD players will cease playing 44.1kHz/16 bit audio, and my 900+ CDs will be rendered useless relics of an age gone by- like so many LPs or Edison cylinders or wire recorders.

Today's musicians, especially electronic musicians, should take heed, and think clearly and closely on this- what one commits to recording is to be forgotten. The only eternity is the eternity of the moment time does not exist. Regardless of how famous you are today, you and your music will fade from the world- first through your own personal death, making performance impossible, and then through the forgetting process of technological change. It is only through the active participation in the moment is eternity found, and this moment is shrouded in this flickering fading illusion of time on a crowded planet of clocks and screens, records and monuments, all spent making plans in idle chit chat chit chat that we cling to so tenaciously and call it "Life". We try to make it last, and we piteously cry to "Angels", "Muses", and our Gods and archetypes to help us, but they can't help us- for the moment is all there is, and there is nothing for something to last "into". P The moment of music must be joyously celebrated, for life and a life in music is as much of a dance as it is a good idea.