

*Journal of the
American Musical
Instrument Society*

VOLUME XVI • 1990



Copyright by the [American Musical Instrument Society](#).
Content may be used in accordance with the principles of fair
use under [Section 107 of the United States Copyright Act](#).
Content may not be reproduced for commercial purposes.

Craig H. Roell. *The Piano in America, 1890–1940*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989. xix, 396 pp.; 38 black-and-white illustrations, 4 tables. ISBN: 0-8078-1802-X. \$35.95.

Prospective readers of *The Piano in America, 1890–1940*, should be forewarned that the contents of the book may not be exactly what they were expecting from the title. It is not a technological, organological, or musicological study of the piano's recent history, nor is it, strictly speaking, a social history of the instrument. What is examined here is the modern history of the business of selling pianos, from the time of peak piano production in America in the late nineteenth century until just before World War II. The study traces the various developments that took place in the marketing of pianos as a response to concurrent changes in the country's social values, its appreciation of culture, and the economic climate.

For the large middle-class of the Victorian age, the piano performed a role far more complex than just the obvious one of musical instrument. Ever since the late eighteenth century, the presence of a piano in a household was a visible indicator of a family's cultural refinement. As a non-essential furnishing, it also made obvious the owner's ability to afford such luxury items. In addition to these long-standing considerations, the Victorians emphasized the piano as a symbol which drew the family together and reinforced, through spiritually uplifting music, the morality which was so much a part of its existence. It is little wonder that piano production and sales enjoyed prosperity in such an environment.

The fabric of society changed rapidly, however, with the beginning of an industrialized and modern-thinking twentieth century. A profusion of new technology began to make life easier for the masses. More leisure time was now available and with it came the need for various ways to occupy it. The old idea that "anything worth having is worth working for" (including proficiency at the piano) was rapidly growing stale. For the moment, the player piano became the answer to accessing the joys of music without years of practice and lessons, but the advent of radio and the phonograph soon left the market for the automatic piano high and dry, since they now provided music for the millions in the easiest sort of way. What ensued for the piano industry was a long, slow process of recreating a market for its product, placing renewed emphasis on the instrument's unique abilities in music making. The struggle took place not only against such foes as the radio, phonograph, and such other new leisure products as the automobile, but also in the face of dire economic conditions in the 1920s and 1930s.

The triumph must be counted among the great success stories of the modern business world.

A Samuel Davis Fellow in Business History at Ohio State University, Roell has done about as thorough a job of researching his subject as one could expect. He has apparently scoured bibliographic sources for material in support of this study. The text frequently contains quotations from period trade publications, newspapers, and government documents, as well as a wide range of more general sources concerning business, music, and social history. Although the book is not encyclopedic in its coverage of piano firms in existence during the period, more than adequate analysis is given to the major players, particularly Steinway and Baldwin. One of the more useful reference components is a table in the appendix that lists numerous piano firms and the larger holding company that controlled them as of about 1916. A small group of black-and-white photographs illustrates various piano advertisements of the period and the portraits of various industry leaders.

Researchers interested in the physical and musical characteristics of the early twentieth-century piano will find only limited interest in this book. However, it would seem to be good reading for anyone who has had involvement in the selling or manufacturing of the modern piano. Indeed, an advertising leaflet for the book carries an endorsement by no less than Henry Z. Steinway, saying, "Should be required reading for everybody in the industry." Although the book's approach is certainly directed more toward historians of business and sociology than readers who are musically-oriented, there is much incidental discussion of topics that are relevant to music historians. For instance, considerable space is devoted to the phenomena of the player piano and the forces which led to its popularity and later downfall. There is also extensive investigation into how music education influenced the piano-selling market. From a business perspective, the most enlightening facet that emerges from this study is how progressive and innovative the piano industry was in its business practices compared to other commercial ventures.

For all its scholarly depth, it must be said that this book does not tell its story in a particularly interesting way. In the preface, the author frequently refers to the book as a "study." So it must be, perhaps, for such an admittedly dry subject can not lend itself easily to an entertaining narrative. The writer too is somewhat to blame, however, for he has a rambling and wordy writing style that makes for very tedious reading. The early portions are especially slow going, with lengthy scrutiny of Victorian work ethic and so-

cial values and their effects on the purchase of pianos for domestic use. Later chapters contain tiresome examination of the various agencies and organizations that were involved in reviving the piano business. Although consideration of such elements is, of course, critical to an understanding of the book's subject, the degree of digression into this material intrudes upon the flow of events.

Among readers interested in musical instruments, it is doubtful that many would seek out, for casual reading, a book about the business history of the piano. In the long run, the book's value will most likely be as a fine reference work, from which scholars may draw supporting material for studies dealing more directly with the piano. In 1911, Alfred Dolge, in his *Pianos and their Makers* (Covina, Calif.: Covina Publishing Company, 1911), committed to print what he, as an insider to the trade, knew about the piano industry. Eighty years from now I suspect we will also be grateful to Mr. Roell for having documented a slightly later epoch of this subject.

DARCY KURONEN, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Don L. Smithers. *The Music and History of the Baroque Trumpet before 1721*. 2nd ed. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988. 352 pp.; 21 black-and-white plates, 17 musical examples, 2 tables. Hard-bound. ISBN: 0-8093-1497-5. \$50.00.

Smithers's *The Music and History of the Baroque Trumpet before 1721* began as a doctoral dissertation at Oxford University and was published in its first edition by Syracuse University Press in 1973. While the book received considerable attention by trumpeters, its limited printing, an unfortunate review in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, and other circumstances of poor marketing prevented it from access to a wider musical audience. The first edition set a high standard for trumpet research and planted the seeds of the renaissance in natural trumpet performance.

Despite the newly-found professionalism of the historically-informed performance practice movement, the natural trumpet remains a problematic instrument. It may be the last major historical instrument to be mastered and brought to a high professional standard. Many performers and teachers have suffered from negative critiques in the press for their "work-in-progress" performances on uncompromised baroque trumpets. Some of the thickest skinned performers have given up the instrument because of the economic implications and negative status that these reviews had on their careers. The 1960s and 1970s-vintage compromised reproduction in-