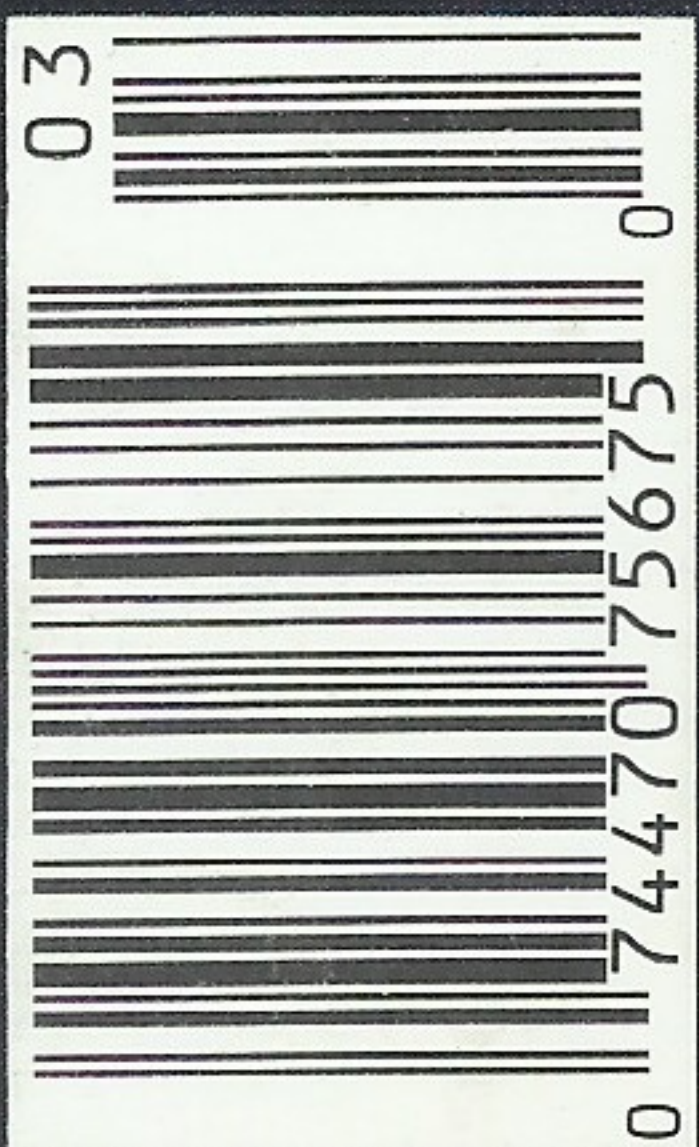


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GREAT COMPOSERS AT THE KEYBOARD: SCOTT JOPLIN, GEORGE GERSHWIN, ET AL. Scott Joplin¹, George Gershwin², R. Erlebach³, Phil Ohman⁴, Freddie Rich⁵, Constance Mering⁶, Frank Milne⁷, piano rolls. FONÈ 90 F 16 CD [DDD]; 72:26. (Distributed by Allegro.)

JOPLIN: *Maple Leaf Rag*¹. *Magnetic Rag*¹. *The Cascades*¹. *Weeping Willow*¹. **JOPLIN-HAYDEN:** *Somethin' Doin'*¹. **SCOTT:** *Frog Legs Rag*¹. **HANDY:** *Ole Miss Rag*¹. **GRANT:** *Arrah Go On I'm Gonna Go Back to Oregon*². **KERN:** *Miss 1917: The Land Where the Good Songs Go*^{2,3}. **SHILKRET:** *Make Believe (You Are Glad You Are Sorry)*². **GERSHWIN:** *Lady, Be Good: So Am I*²; *Fascinating Rhythm*⁵; *O, Lady Be Good!*⁵ *La-La-Lucille: Tee-Oodle-Um-Bum-Bo*². *Rhapsody in Blue*². *Rosalie: Oh, Gee! Oh, Joy*⁴. **BERLIN:** *A Russian Lullaby*⁶. *How Deep Is the Ocean?*⁷ *Music Box Review of 1922: Lady of the Evening*^{3,7}. *What Does It Matter?*⁴ *Ziegfeld Folies of 1919: A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody*⁷. **WHITEMAN:** *Play That Song of India Again*^{3,7}.

Even as we tumble full tilt into the age of what Fonè's notes quaintly call "digital equipments," our infatuation with perforated paper continues unabated: the more accurate our contemporary recordings, it seems, the greater our desire to hear the legendary turn-of-the-century pianists as if they were still before us. To be sure, the sound of these new Fonè discs is—like the sound of many recent piano-roll transfers—clear, immediate, almost palpable. But its very quality only helps to blind us to an unpleasant truth: piano rolls achieve their sonic quality only through a falsification of the original artistry next to which artificial stereo, colorization of old films, and even Tate's rewritings of Shakespeare seem like acts of reverence. I've already detailed the reasons why rolls inevitably distort (see in particular "Roll Over Busoni" in *Fanfare* 11:6 and my reviews of the Ampico rolls in 8:6, 9:1, and 9:3). Suffice it to say here that while there's a great deal of historical information to be learned from *studying* rolls, there's not much aesthetic pleasure to be gained from listening to the spastic gestures that result when a fairly primitive machine is asked to duplicate the most refined human action. Rhythmic nuance, dynamic variation, tonal balance, details of articulation: pretty nearly everything that makes a performance worth hearing is chewed up, leaving us with, at best, a pale reflection and, at worst, a sickly caricature. Certainly, nothing in Busoni's disc recordings, and nothing that you've ever read about his playing, suggests that he would flatten out the accompaniments of Chopin's op. 28/2 as if he were a not-terribly talented sightreader, or that he would let inner voices jolt your attention like unruly children slamming doors.

The Joplin rolls are especially aggravating. For the past twenty years, of course, the authentic Joplin style has been something of a grail, and even these springless rolls might at first seem to offer insight into two areas of dispute: Joplin's intended tempos and the degree of textual elaboration he was willing to allow. But there's not much reason to believe that the rolls are being played at the proper speed. (*Maple Leaf* runs nearly half a minute quicker than the transfer on *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*). And especially in the light of what we know about the state of Joplin's own technique in his final years, the glossy legato octaves strongly suggest after-the-fact manipulation by technicians with paper-punches. The rolls thus leave us with serious doubts about what Joplin actually played, and hence with doubts about the actual origin of the (generally minor) textual emendations we hear.

As for the rest of the Joplin/Gershwin disc: it may be true that the relentless grind of player piano technology is less damaging to 1920s pop music than to Chopin. Even so, I doubt you'll be pulling Whiteman's recasting of "Song of India" from your shelves very often, even if you throw a lot of fox-trot parties.

Lengthy notes in Italian, briefer notes in something like English, and amusing extracts from Duo-Art catalogs. Lots of misinformation on the jewel-boxes themselves. Not a good idea.

Peter J. Rabinowitz

DONNA AMATO: A PIANO PORTRAIT. Donna Amato, piano. OLYMPIA OCD 352 [DDD]; 76:26. (Distributed by KOCH International.)

LISZT: *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2* (with Rachmaninov cadenza). *Consolation No. 3. Liebestraum No. 3.* **DEBUSSY:** *Arabesque No. 1. Suite bergamasque: Clair de lune. Preludes, Book I: No. 8, La Fille aux cheveux de lin; No. 10, La Cathédrale engloutie. La plus que lente.* **RAVEL:** *Pavane pour une infante défunte.* **GERSHWIN:** *Three Preludes. Rhapsody in Blue. George Gershwin Song Book: Six Songs.*

Amato is an American pianist evidently active in Europe. This recording was made in Norway. Her biography cites performances in London, New York, and Canada, and quotes a favorable review of her playing from this journal.