

# Stanford aims to bring player pianos back to life

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(AP)—Stanford University wants to unlock the secrets of the player piano, which brought recorded music into living rooms long before there were cassettes, compact discs or iPods.

Stanford researchers have launched an ambitious effort to restore and study instruments known as reproducing pianos that recorded major composers performing their own work in the early 20th century.

"This technology of the reproducing piano was really astonishing to people at the time because they could hear major pianists playing [music](#) exactly the way they played in performance," said Jerry McBride, head music librarian at Stanford.

The researchers also plan to preserve and digitize thousands of perforated paper rolls that recorded and played back piano performances with impressive accuracy. They eventually hope to put the recordings online.

Stanford's Player Piano Project was bolstered by the recent acquisitions of three private collections of player pianos, piano-playing machines and music rolls.

Among them is an important collection from Denis Condon, an Australian who collected player pianos and rare music rolls for six decades before he died in August at age 78. It includes 10 reproducing pianos and more than 7,500 rolls, with recordings by composers such as

George Gershwin, Scott Joplin, Igor Stravinsky and Claude Debussy.

"In some cases, we have no other recordings of these great artists, so in that sense they are an incredibly rare and very valuable window into the past," said Kumaran Arul, a music performance historian at the university.

This spring, the university plans to hold a campus concert featuring a restored player piano accompanied by the Stanford Symphony Orchestra.

George Barth, who heads Stanford's keyboard programs, said he brings out the reproducing pianos in class so his students can learn from the masters.

"Our students are hearing a sort of richness, flexibility and freedom," Barth said. "They're astonished by the sort of things that they hear because they're so unexpected. And they think, 'Man, and this is the composer doing this?'"

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