

**Review – Pianola Concert, Purcell Room, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2003**  
**Published in the Pianola Journal, Volume 15, March 2003**

“It was worth coming just to see that guy’s beard.” This comment, overheard as I left the Purcell Room, seemed somewhat unfair. While I cannot deny that Rex Lawson’s beard is impressive – reminiscent of Albus Dumbledore, perhaps, or Gandalf in his more imposing moments – there were far better reasons for attending this concert than mere beard-watching. For this concert was a rarity: an evening which was musically satisfying, entertaining and educational. Lawson proved to be an admirable and eloquent guide to the vagaries of the pianola, a skilled comic poet, a sensitive accompanist and a thoughtful musician – let us not conclude, as my fellow concert-goer did, that the beard is the man.

The Purcell Room ‘pianola evening’ formed part of the Philharmonia Orchestra’s Prokofiev and Shostakovich festival, a series of concerts focussing on the relationship between these two composers and the Stalinist regime under which they wrote so much of their music. While there was, thankfully, little of Stalin in the repertoire being performed here, there was an understandable slant towards the Russian, beginning with repertoire recorded by Prokofiev for the Duo-Art reproducing piano.

This is, of course, hardly the place to criticise Prokofiev’s playing, particularly when the final performance was evidently aided by subsequent editing of the piano rolls. Suffice to say that there was something both fascinating and haunting about hearing notes played by a dead composer (and a great dead composer at that). The notes were deliciously played, including Prokofiev’s arrangement of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Sheherezade* – the composer here ‘accompanying’ Editha Konwitschny’s elegant rendition of the famous violin solo – and a performance of Rachmaninov’s Prelude in G Minor. Here, Lawson’s gentlemanly introductions to the mechanism and history of the reproducing piano were supplemented by a poem he had composed while transporting pianolas up and down English motorways. Reminiscent of Hilaire Belloc, it summarised what many may have felt about Rachmaninov’s music:

“Rachmaninov, a serious child, by nature hardly ever smiled.

He couldn’t bear to play with toys,

Like other little girls and boys,

But, wracked by deep consuming gloom,

He sat alone, predicting doom.

In later life, this dismal manner

Pervaded all his works for pianner;

Said he, "I think there's nothing finer  
Than making music in the minor..."

The second half of the concert was devoted to the potential of the pianola – the foot-operated player-piano. I suppose I should confess that I have long been sceptical of the pianola. To a life-long pianist, who has on occasion spent many hours trying to persuade unwilling fingers to hit the right notes, there has always seemed to be something unfair about an instrument that plays the notes all on its own. No doubt this is a stigma that pianolists the world over must confront, and I am pleased to say that I have now been both corrected and converted. For, while the reproducing piano in the first half did function on its own (with some help from the mains switch), the performances in the second half were very much dependent on the musical abilities of the two pianolists – Rex Lawson and Denis Hall. Although I cannot pretend to understand the mechanisms involved, I do at least now appreciate the importance of Lawson and Hall's dancing feet (and hands) in controlling tempo, accents and phrasing.

The climax of the evening was a performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, first transferred onto pianola rolls in 1921. Before this, Lawson demonstrated his skill as an accompanist in a performance of Prokofiev's Five Melodies for Violin and Piano. Once again the violin part was played by Editha Konwitschny, a German violinist and recent graduate of the Royal Academy. It surely cannot be easy for a pianola and pianolist to take on the role usually assigned to piano and pianist, but Lawson and Konwitschny produced a lilting and effective performance (though with the occasional hint that the violinist was adapting herself more than she might have liked to the music dictated by the piano roll).

And so to Stravinsky – a composer who more or less managed to avoid the evils of Stalinism, but who shared a number of musical interests with Prokofiev. He was, in Lawson's words, "fascinated by the pianola," and recomposed many of his greatest works for the instrument, including *Petrushka*, the *Firebird*, *Les Noces*, *Pulcinella* and the *Song of the Nightingale*. In part, this seems to have been a result of this increasingly 'modernist' composer's wish to banish interpreters to the dark corners of history – to objectify his music and free it from the irritating interventions of conductors and orchestras (though he did himself try on a number of occasions to record a 'definitive' version of the Rite).

The *Rite of Spring* - a work which uses an impressively-sized orchestra in its usual form – takes up nine rolls in total, and in order to play it this evening's two performers had to use two pianolas and two concert grand pianos, used alternately. The result was a

remarkable performance, bringing to the fore the *Rite*'s most percussive qualities. Lawson and Hall showed a fine knowledge of the score, and its constantly varying tempi and dynamic indications. This reviewer is only sorry that Hall proved so reluctant to acknowledge the final applause which he undoubtedly deserved.

With missionaries such as these, the pianola may yet reclaim its rightful position in the musical legacy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Certainly, this was a stimulating evening's entertainment – a fine mix of musicality and erudition, an all-time great as a warm-up act, and, yes, possibly the perfect beard.