

Artists of the Mastertouch Piano Roll Co. 1919-2006



Glenn Amer (pianist) with Adrian Jorgenson (roll cutter) at Mastertouch in 2005. Glenn is about to watch the perforation of one of his rolls. The rolls to the left of the photograph (on the rack) are lined-up for the printing of the lyrics.

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To the Australian artists, Lettie Keyes, Len Luscombe, and Edith and Laurel Pardey must be given the credit for having produced many thousands of music arrangements for piano roll during the subsequent years of roll manufacture in Australia. Their work was complemented by imported arrangements, especially by the two American "greats" - Max Kortlander and J. Lawrence Cook.

Music arrangement for piano roll is a highly specialised craft, very far removed from just sitting down and playing at a keyboard. When the piano is played by hand the pianist creates "expression" or musical artistry by using the "loud" (sustain) and soft pedals and accentuating notes by varying the touch on the keys. When a piano roll is played back (except on special "reproducing" player-pianos), while the "loud" and soft pedalling may be mechanically recreated, all notes are played at the one intensity - often too loudly if the player-pianist is insensitive! Therefore less bass is required on a piano roll than in hand playing - often a single note will suffice, while "Singing-along" arrangement on the other hand requires a pronounced melody line, which is usually achieved by raising the right-hand or treble one full octave higher than used in hand-playing. This leaves an empty "hole" in the middle range of the piano, where, because the artist is not restricted to playing with their ten fingers, a counter melody can be introduced to "orchestrate" the piece. A piano roll is therefore effectively an arrangement for trio. As a consequence of this, while many pianists came to record, few undertook the onerous task of editing their work preferring to leave it to the "house" artists to do it for them.

These Australian "house" editor-artists were highly esteemed in the musical world of their day. Lettie Keyes was Ivor Novello's personal accompanist; Len Luscombe, at a very early age was the conductor of the Majestic Theatre Orchestra in Melbourne and Laurel Pardey, dressed as a boy, won acclaim, as The King of Jazz!

By the late fifties and early sixties, however, new rhythms meteored across the musical horizon - Rock and Roll and Beatlemania. Most of the older artists found the transition to this idiom too exacting and the roll-playing public were lucky that artists of the calibre of Ray Hill and Greg Crease took up the challenge of lifting player-piano music into this modern age.

LETTIE KEYES - Yes, this was her real name - Letitia Mary Josephine Keyes! (Most piano roll arrangers, as there were so few in the field, often used pseudonyms to make the list of artists recording appear more impressive. Lettie Keyes used her married name L. M. Thomson for any rolls where she was not so happy with the final arrangement, whereas J. Lawrence Cook on the other hand used a number of pseudonyms to indicate the different styles of his playing.)

Lettie Keyes was born in Nathalia in Victoria, where her mother was the Matron of the hospital and her father was the local doctor. Together with her sister, Nina, she received a sound musical education at the convent and as her family was well-connected, went to finishing school in Switzerland. Her mother was an

accomplished pianiste too, so many winter evenings were spent playing duets and even trios, orchestrating the overtures and pieces so popular before the First World War. Derived from her association with Ivor Novello, Lettie Keyes' great love was opera. It was inevitable when she started work with the original firm ("The Duo") (1923) that she would specialise in cutting rolls of Grand Opera and Musical Comedy. She had a very brilliant ability in interpreting and arranging orchestral scores for the piano and the "bridges" which she interpolated, to go from one aria to another, often with complicated key changes, became the signature of her rolls. She also specialised in cutting, with one unique difference, the ballads so popular at that time. As she was accompaniste to Peter Dawson, she invited him to the factory and he sang as she recorded! In the ballad rolls such as "Mandalay" and "The Floral Dance" we have what amounts to his personal vocal interpretation of those pieces.

Lettie Keyes worked for G.H.Horton until 1929 when an argument arose about her employment as the Musical Director of the Globe Theatre, while still recording for Mastertouch. When she left, George Horton gave instructions that none of her masters were to be destroyed. As a consequence of this, especially when "The Mitch Miller Show" on television revived so many of the popular songs of the Roaring Twenties in the Sixties, much of her work was reissued. By that time of course, she was back recording the Top of Pops for the Mastertouch Piano Roll Company. This prompted one correspondent to observe "she must be as old as Methuselah", which of course was not the case!

In the early Thirties Lettie Keyes formed an association with Eileen Foley which lasted a lifetime. With the advent of wireless (radio) together they played for Radio Luxembourg. Later they became musical directors on the S. S. Kanimbla. With the advent of the Second World War they "came ashore" and ran a very successful music college "The Keynote College of Music".

Lettie Keyes returned to work for the Mastertouch Piano Roll Company in 1963 and continued to record piano rolls until her death in 1970. Outside the world of piano roll recording Lettie Keyes was a most sought after authority and accompaniste in the many classes and societies given to the encouragement of young people who subsequently often achieved operatic success. Her versatility in the field of music also covered tours with a number of international celebrities, both within Australia and abroad. A post-war tour for the Defence Forces with Strella Wilson found her in Japan and present at the signing of the Peace Treaty. She also gave frequent radio recitals and is perhaps best remembered for her work on the Macquarie Network in "Calling the Stars".

EDITH & LAUREL PARDEY, affectionately known as "the girls" were duo pianistes. Both girls received an effective musical grounding at the convent at Katoomba in NSW. Their mother ran a guest-house for people holidaying in the Blue Mountains. The Pardey guest-house was very popular because the Saturday night dancing was accompanied by the two Pardey girls playing as duets all the popular hits of the day. Edith was also the organist at St Hilda's, while Laurel was the dinner-music pianiste at the prestigious Hotel Carrington. It was at the Carrington and subsequently at the Pardey guest-house that George Horton heard Laurel play. He was so impressed that he asked her to come to the City Road premises of E. F. Wilks to play the "recording" pianola which he had invented. This event occurred sometime in 1917 - the date is vague - and the tune recorded is now subject to some dispute. Laurel always maintained that it was a popular song of the day, "Yarrowonga", which, however, when roll manufacture began in 1919 appeared as the thirteenth roll released on the then "Duo" label. George Horton in his reminiscences claimed that had he taken a shot-gun and fired it through the paper he would have achieved the same effect as his recording machine, for as it was, it worked too slowly to record the correct timing of this dance tune. Nevertheless the results of this first recording session were sufficiently attractive to encourage Eric Howes of Howes & Howes Ltd - Gentlemen's Outfitters - of Pitt Street Sydney, to put up the capital for the establishment of G.H.Horton & Co Ltd and to send George Horton to America to buy the necessary machinery to manufacture piano rolls at E. F. Wilks' City Road factory.

Edith and Laurel Pardey, together with the Ludermanns, became George Horton's first employees in his piano roll manufacturing venture. Rudy Ludermann became the first mechanic to help with the installation and maintenance of the roll machinery, while his sister, always addressed as Miss Ludermann, became the fore-lady over all the women, who, because they worked for lower wages, formed the bulk of the staff.

Unlike the popular recording artists of today, Edith and Laurel were "nine-to-fivers", that is they commenced work at nine o'clock on Monday morning and finished the five day week at five o'clock on Friday evening. Initially they were kept very busy "churning out the pops" to build up a supply of masters which could become the basis of a catalogue in continuity. Eventually, as more and more "named" artists were called in to record, Edith, especially, was expected to edit their work - that is, these artists simply played their work on the keyboard and went home, Edith did the rest. This apprenticeship was to serve her in good stead later in her life, when the Horton recording machine had broken down and she was expected to sit down and simply

graph out the music roll arrangement on blank paper, which she subsequently turned into a master roll by cutting it out, hole by hole, on the hand cutter!

Edith married Frank Baker Murn, the Director of Post and Telegraph in New South Wales. Frank was an extremely sentimental man and outside of his official work he gave his time to writing poetry! This came as a great boon to the roll industry, because, when George Horton gave the edict that piano rolls wherever possible should have printed words, Frank Baker Murn obliged by writing lyrics where there were none! Edith continued on as recording artist until her son, Pardey Murn, was born. Laurel then continued on through the difficult days of the Second World War. To maintain the illusion that a number of artists were recording, the names Edith & Laurel Pardey; Laurel Pardey and E. Murn were alternated on the new releases! So onerous was the task of recording and keeping to production dead-lines, while worrying about her husband, John Sullivan, who was away at the front, Laurel had a nervous breakdown. So that roll manufacture could be sustained through this critical time, Edith returned as recording artist and began cutting the masters on the hand-cutter! She kept on recording until her death in 1961, although her task became exceedingly difficult as more and more the ancillary machinery fell into disrepair.

Barclay Wright has memories of Edith, when she was recording for The Mastertouch Piano Roll Company (1961), sitting at a little wicker table, graphing out the master-roll by hand. The most astounding thing about this was that the music-rule she used as a scale had been used so often that all the engraved coding on it had worn off and she was virtually doing it from memory! Key-changes, introductions and endings were traced from old rolls just as you would trace through a stencil. So onerous was this activity that no repeat passages would be "recorded" and the roll was joined much as editors now join films, by utilising alphabetical phrasing - that is; A-B; C-D; A-B; E-F; etc until the complete arrangement had been "recorded". One other interesting short-cut Edith used in her hand-cutting was to record the melody in the right-hand, or treble, as a double-octave chord, through which she would draw a blue line. As a musical variation, on one passage, the master-worker, when joining Edith's hand-cut master for a final, was required to leave all the holes above the blue line open, "masking off" those below with little pieces of paper as the Edith's master passed over the "reading" bar on the master machine. On another passage the master-worker might be required to leave those below the line open, and to block off those above! It was a little like the children's game "Fly Away, Peter; Fly Away, Paul"; with embarrassing results if the master-worker became confused so that on the final roll the melody jumped up then down an octave in the middle of a phrase!

Over the years Edith and Laurel built up the huge repertoire of waltzes and foxtrots which to this day remain the "evergreens" for piano-roll playing enthusiasts, who sentimentally yearn for the good old days of the family sing-song around the pianola. "The Girls" in their four-handed arrangements became masters at converting marches and even sentimental old ballads such as "Moonlight and Roses" into their now familiar "pianola-style" - (A style which produced the sound now synonymous for most people today with the very word pianola!)

LEN LUSCOMBE was the principal of, and recording artist for, the Anglo American Player Roll Company. His rolls initially therefore appeared on the "Broadway" label. As he was the Company's sole recording artist in Australia, Len used a number of pseudonyms to create the impression of a larger staff of resident artists! Names used by Len Luscombe include Dan Rawlins, Art Kaplan, and Earl Lester. Unlike other artists who used pseudonyms, Len did not use them to indicate variations in the style of his playing - they are all readily discernible as his work. Len also utilised an unique offer from the ACME Machine Company in Newark, New Jersey, USA,- the company which had supplied his roll machinery. They offered to supply him with quantities of American masters on a monthly basis. Initially these were by artists such as Oscar Haase and Herbert Jones and were rather plain and uninteresting, but towards the end of his agreement works by the great arrangers of QRS, were forwarded out. This gave the Broadway catalogue a decided edge on what was offered under the Mastertouch label.

Because the Broadway rolls were considered by many to be musically superior to Mastertouch, George Horton was also moved to import masters from QRS even prior to the deal where he took over QRS Australia in 1929. Because he paid more he received superior releases earlier than those supplied to Broadway! The effects of the Great Depression and the coming of the Second World War however, soon made the importing of masters economically un-viable for both companies and post 1940 both fell back on the work of the Australian artist, who could also edit. Whereas Edith became "house-bound", Len continued to circulate in the musical circles of his day. His work never lost its freshness and of all the original Australian artists he made the best transition to recording the new rhythms of pop music post-war. (To obtain access to his not inconsiderable library of masters was one of the main reasons why G. H. Horton bought the Broadway label on Len's death in 1956.)

Len's successes artistically while still a teenager have already been mentioned; what is not generally known

is that they were achieved at great personal cost! His mother and father were Polish immigrants to Melbourne. Len's father played trumpet; his mother was a music teacher. Because his father never achieved great success, Len's mother determined that Len would be a child prodigy! His piano lessons began at the age of three and so traumatic was the experience that Len in later life remarked "No child of mine should ever look at any musical instrument unless he really wants to!"

Len was an intensely shy person but this did not stop him observing the musical trends of his time. As a result his arrangements never became stylised and a review of his work from the beginning to the end (1956) reveals a remarkable musicianship.

MAX KORTLANDER & J. LAWRENCE COOK: Max Kortlander was a "staff" artist with the original company producing QRS rolls in Chicago in the 1920s. In this capacity he visited the Davis/QRS Australia business in Australia with a view to establishing a recording department here. The Great Depression put a stop to this when QRS withdrew from Australia. Fortunately as the Depression bit deeper in the U.S. Max Kortlander had sufficient foresight (aided by his royalties from popular music which he composed) to take over QRS and move the operation to New York as the Imperial Industrial Corporation.

In the years of its heyday in Chicago, the original company secured the services of many of the leading pianists both in the popular and classical fields - artists of the calibre of Pete Wendling, Lee S. Roberts, Victor Arden, Zez Confrey and Fats Waller. Lee S. Roberts, besides being an accredited performer in classical music, was the "inventor" of a popular chord-playing system (similar to the "Shefte" system) which allowed many people to learn to play the piano without tears! Zez Confrey was the orchestrator for the scores for the George White Scandals and much of the early Gershwin music. Victor Arden and Phil Ohman were popular duo-pianists in the American live theatre and were well known as recording artists for early phonograph records and on radio. Fats Waller and James P. Johnson were well-known as master jazz musicians. (Because of the poor recording techniques used to make the early phonograph records, often their piano roll performances are the best way to hear the freshness and fidelity of their original playing today!)

Of all these artists, however, the roll buying public liked Max Kortlander and J. Lawrence Cook the best. Consequently after 1930 and the move to New York most of the repertoire for the new company was recorded initially by Max Kortlander and finally (when the burden of administration became all time consuming for Max), by J. Lawrence Cook. J. Lawrence Cook is considered to be the "dean" of American roll arrangers. He became famous as a mimic of others' styles and it is almost impossible to distinguish his arrangements from the works of famous musicians who could not record directly for the company because of the complexity of recording on the "arranging piano". The use of the original Melville Clark pencil-marker recording machine had been abandoned and J. Lawrence Cook used a double-keyboarded piano which was tubed up directly to a master-roll cutter installed alongside the piano as the recording machine. This machine did not run at a speed commensurate with paper travel for normal playing - in fact it was advanced hole by hole (step by step) by J. Lawrence Cook operating a pedal-lever with his right foot! Bass rhythms and melody could be played on the lower keyboard, while the counter melody or third hand, was held down by the locking-in keys of the top keyboard. On a visit to watch J. Lawrence Cook at work, Barclay Wright (an experienced arranger for Mastertouch, and a pipe-organist as well, used to using his feet while playing) upon being invited to record, found he could not co-ordinate all the steps required to produce a piano roll master by this process!

J. Lawrence Cook liked to play musical tricks on his adoring public, the simplest of which was often a number of key changes, used one after the other, until he worked his way back to his original key! When Max Kortlander died and the company moved its operation to Buffalo, J. Lawrence Cook did not make the move with them but elected to record for Mastertouch in Australia instead. This he continued to do until his death in 1976. The current Mastertouch catalogue therefore features QRS works brought out in the Twenties and Thirties as well as featuring a QRS artist in the Sixties and Seventies!

Complementing the work of the so-called "house" artists, G.H.Horton & Co Ltd. also engaged the services of a wide variety of local and visiting celebrities. By the time Mastertouch took over the QRS label in Australia the list of eminent recording artists was a most impressive one - Lindley Evans, Frank Hutchens, Alexander Hmelnitsky, Paul Vinogradoff, Henry Penn, Ernest Truman, Rose Dornbush Victor Arden, Frank La Forge, and Howard Brockway are but a few names selected from the original recording schedules. Frank Hutchens and Lindley Evans, duo-pianists, are best remembered now in association with the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music and the famous ABC Community Singing Concerts held at the Sydney Town Hall. Lindley Evans also endeared himself to many children as the Musical Director for the Argonauts on ABC Radio. Ernest Truman was the second and the longest serving City of Sydney Town Hall Organist. His rendition of "The Storm" on the mighty Town Hall organ used to rattle the pressed metal ceilings and rumble

the windows throughout the entire building, much to the delight of the packed audiences who attended his "Pleasant Sunday Afternoon Concerts"! Rose Dornbush was an expatriate Australian who had spent a considerable time in Germany before the First World War. She was employed by the company because she became the victim of the "anti-German" feeling prevalent in Australia after the war, and so could not get any work at all, despite her great talent.

When Barclay Wright recommissioned the recording machine (1963), the Mastertouch Piano Roll Company was again able to invite present day eminent Australian musicians to contribute an even wider variety in the style of player-piano music offered to the public. Noel Wilson, Reg Lewis, Peggy Lee, Charles Field and Ray Hill each contributed to a new sound in piano rolls. Reg Lewis is probably better remembered as the leader of the orchestra at "The Theatre Beautiful" - the Prince Edward Theatre, while he and Charles Field were also favourites of the clientele of Princes' Restaurant, where they played duo-piano work on the two Steinway grands. An interesting return to the old ways also occurred when one of the firm's employees, Bill Denham, created quite a number of very popular arrangements of current tunes by graphing out these arrangements on blank paper and hand-cutting the masters on the hand-cutter, which had been used last by Edith Murn at the end of her career as "house" artist.

GREG CREASE - Undoubtedly the bulk of the present day recordings have been created by Greg Crease, who came to Mastertouch from Her Majesty's Theatre in Sydney. Greg brought with him a wealth of knowledge of modern orchestration which enabled him to lift the new recordings into the modern musical idiom. Greg has a Bachelor of Arts from the University of N.S.W. and is an Associate of Trinity College London. His association with present-day Musical Comedy reads as an almost continuous list of all the shows to tour Australia nationally in recent time; Chorus Line; I Do, I Do; You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown; Hair; My Fair Lady; The Sound of Music; Oliver; Barnum; Annie; They're Playing Our Song; La Cage Aux Folles; Anything Goes; Irene; Sugar Babies; The Wiz; and Pippin! Despite this onerous demand on his talents, Greg is also a most sought after accompanist to such artists of the calibre of Olivia Newton-John; Geraldine Turner; Jill Perryman and Peter Allen. Greg has also featured on the Australian Casts Albums of Annie; Barnum; They're Playing Our Song and The Sound of Music. As relaxation Greg likes to tutor in vocal technique and has tutored at the National Summer School for Singers! Greg has been the principal recording artist for the Mastertouch Piano Roll Company since 1980. Greg has been very quick to utilise the possibilities created by the computer interface which was installed in-line in the recording process by Garry Luke, who wrote special programmes for this purpose. With his skill in orchestration Greg has been able to use the computer to recreate the exact styles of today's audio-recording artists and television personalities, allowing Mastertouch to issue piano rolls of the works of Billy Joel, Bette Midler, Roy Orbison, the Beatles and many others. The problems which beset the older artists with the advent of Rock and Roll has not phased Greg at all! Greg's theatre experience has also allowed him to accompany "live" the silent films which The Friends of Mastertouch has shown to help acquire funds to finance its various activities. The most popular film night, where Greg played and conducted a string trio to accompany the showing of the vintage Australian-made epic "For the Term of His Natural Life", prompted Greg to remark that in the old days at the end of their working day, the members of the theatre orchestras must surely have collapsed from exhaustion!

The following is an alphabetical list of artists whose recordings have been released in Australia on Duo; Mastertouch; Broadway and QRS label:

Clarence Adler; Henry Adler; Eddie Albert; Bernadette Allum; Glenn Amer; Mike Amorosi; Nils Andersen; Mary Angell; Victor Arden; Felix Arndt; Ralph Austin; Hi Babbit; Graeme Barclay; Evan Bart; Barton & Ellis; Ted Baxter; Lionel Belasco; Bob Berkman; Earl Billings; Robert Billings; Bill Blodgett; Harry Blond; Rube Bloom; James Brash; Howard Brockway; Mae Brown; Mary Brown; Brown & Prell; Brown & Wansborough; Burch & Haskell; The Burke Sisters; Molly Carew; Adam Carroll; Herbert Carroll; Jean Carroll; Fred Cassidy; George Castling; Joe Catalano; Frank Catt; Wilbur Chenowith; Red Coghlan; Zez Confrey; J. Lawrence Cook; Cook & Hilliard; Herbert Cosgrove; Davison & Hunt; Luke Dearlove; Gil Deck; Milton Delcamp; Murray Denham; Cecil de Vrey; "Dickie Bird" Dolan; Rose Dornbush; "Pepe" Doyle; Lyell Duke; Michael Dupre; Ellis & Barton; E. Erdman; Rudy Ehrlich; Esberg & Hunt; Lindley Evans; Edmund Farnborough; William Ferrier; George Feyer; Charles Field; Walter Fifielski; Frank La Forge; Rowena Fox; Ignaz Friedman; George Gershwin; John Godfrey; Leopold Godowsky; Lottie Gordon; Philip Gordon; Wistrell Gordon; Lew Gould; Percy Grainger; David Gramza; Oscar Haase; Mark Hambourg; Haskell & Baker; Cora Mel Hatton; H. J. Hayes; Herschel Henlere; G. Henrichs; Walter A. Higgs; Ray Hill; Alexander Hmelnitsky; Jack Hoban; George Holmes; Don Hopkins; Frank Hutchens; McNair Ilginfriz; Freddie Jacobs; James P. Johnson; Herbert Jones; Art Kaplan; George Kestler; Lettie Keyes; Antoine Konstant; Max Kortlander; Jack Laing; F. Lametre; Sid Laney; Ernest Lashmar; Peg Lee; Bryan Leech; Howard Leighton; Earl Lester; Reg Lewis; Tyrrel van Lowe; Jack Lumsdaine; Len Luscombe; Howard Lutter; J. Lybig; R. McArthur-Smith; Louis Marier; Gilbert Marshall; Louis de Mart; Rudi Martin; Silvio Marzini; Richard Merton; Merton & Parker; Frank Milne; Betty Moore; L. S. Moore; Murray & Allison; Elly Ney; Phil Ohman; Osborne & Howe; Edith & Laurel Pardey;

Alfred Parker; Fred Parsons; Henry Penn; Ivan Petrikoff; Horace Prell; Maurice Price; Wynton Prisk; Sergei Rachmaninoff; Dan Rawlins; Howard Raymond; Walter Redding; Rex de Riego; Gary Rev; Richard Ricci; Rivinius & Prell; Lee S. Roberts; J. Russel Robinson; Richard Rodgers; Harold Scott; Scott & Walters; Nathaniel Shilkret; Lee Simms; Al Sinclair; Andre Skalski; Joseph Smith; Kermit A. Smith; Colin Stephenson; Ernest Stevens; Shirley Ann Stivensen; Charlie Strouse; Madame Sturkow-Ryder; Milton Suskind; Beatrice Swinson; Desmond Tanner; Elaine Theris; Ellen Therry; Richard Thew; Rex Todd; Jan Thompson; L. M. Thomson; Ernest Truman; W. Vanderaak; Paul Vinogradoff; Thomas "Fats" Waller; Hugo Walton; Harold Wansborough; Dick Watson; Jeff Waters; Pete Wendling; Mark Wheeler; Brian Williams; Noel Wilson; Fred Wood; Vincent Youmans and Jack Young.