

53003

STEREO

THE
SIENA PIANOFORTE



designed by Ike Millman

DEBUSSY

ESTAMPES

CHILDREN'S CORNER

LA CATHEDRALE ENGLOUTIE

ETUDE POUR LES ARPEGES COMPOSES

L'ISLE JOYEUSE

ONDINE

**MARISA
REGULES**
Pianist

designed by Ike Millman





COUNTERPOINT / ESOTERIC
AN EVEREST RECORDS PRODUCTION



DEBUSSY ON THE SIENA PIANOFORTE

MARISA REGULES, PIANIST

LA CATHEDRALE ENGLOUTIE

ONDINE

ESTAMPES

ÉTUDE POUR LES ARPÈGES COMPOSÉS

CHILDREN'S CORNER

L'ISLE JOYEUSE

The history of The Siena Pianoforte, beginning before 1800, perhaps even before the Christian Era is as fascinating and unbelievable as the amazing tonal colors of its music. Of the original instrument, built before the turn of the 19th century by the Marchisio family of Turin, members of a tight little group of Piedmontese harpsichord makers, only the sounding board remains; a sounding board wafer-thin, like a fine Stradivarius violin.

It is recorded that one of the Marchisio maidens, Rebecca by name, was taken in marriage during the first quarter of the 19th century by Antonio Ferri, a farmer of Siena. The piano was one of their wedding gifts. The Ferri's prospered in Siena, raising their crops of wine-grapes, children and grandchildren. It was only natural in this city, "The Cradle of the Renaissance" that art should play a large part in the family life. Grandson Antonio was a noted woodcarver, and it was he who carved the present case for his Grandmother's piano.

In 1867 the piano, along with other Siennese art treasures was sent to the Paris Exposition where it won numerous accolades. Shortly after its return to Siena, in 1868, on the announcement of the engagement of Crown Prince Umberto, the piano became the wedding gift from the City of Siena to the heir-apparent of the House of Savoy. It was placed in the Quirinal in Rome with the other art-treasures of the Royal Family.

In the late 1880's, Umberto, then King of Italy, while on a Mediterranean tour, visited Jerusalem where he attended a concert by Mathis Yanovsky, a pianist who had emigrated there from Kiev. Even at a time when Liszt's primacy had left little room at the top for anyone else, Yanovsky had achieved whilom fame as a pianist. After the recital he apologized to Umberto for the poor quality of his instrument. If only, he told His Majesty, there was a piano around such as the one he had played before the Czar in St. Petersburg — one on which the great Liszt himself had played.

Yanovsky's grandson Avner Carmi, is quite clear in his recollection of the old man's report on the ensuing exchange: Umberto replied that he, too, owned a piano on which Liszt himself had played, and so saying he invited the distinguished Palestinian settler to make amends for any real or imagined shortcomings in his command appearance by playing the royal instrument whenever he could come to Rome. Reconstructed third-hand by Carmi, His Majesty's further remarks were approximately as follows:

"My prize piano at the Quirinal is an Italian original. It was built over a period of four generations by a father, son, grandson and great-grandson. Liszt called its sounds 'divine,' and indeed it has been compared with the harp of King David himself. This instrument once was exhibited in Paris, and the year after that it was given to me. It is an upright, and every inch of its shining surface is intricately carved. A gallery of immortal composers is sculptured in the wood, each of them from a different land, as if to symbolize that with music — the language of the soil — they are united, prefiguring Isaiah's prophecy of peace in the latter days.

"The legend is that this piano was made of wood from Jerusalem, from the very pillars of Solomon's temple. When the city was destroyed by Titus his men supposedly carried off to Rome the two most beautiful pillars of the temple, Joachim and Boas. In turn they were installed in a new pagan temple, which later collapsed. The foundation was left standing, and in the Christian

PATRIMONIO UC

era a church was erected on the site, again using Solomon's pillars. The legend tells us that this church was knocked down for the last time by an earthquake, and that the wood then was used to make my wonderful piano."

Before Yanovsky could arrange for a Roman holiday, Umberto was assassinated. Crestfallen, the old man extracted a promise from Carmi that he would someday call on Victor Emanuel III and ask to see this amazing piano that was allegedly made of sacred wood from Jerusalem. Years later, en route to Germany to complete his musical education, the dutiful grandson arrived in Rome and went straightaway to the Quirinal. Let him recount the incident:

"To the palace guard I confided that 'I carry a mission, and no doubt the King will be glad to see me'. He laughed at me. All who seek a royal audience must first request it by mail, fully stating their business, the guard informed me. So I sat down and wrote a very long letter, leaving out no detail. There was no reply, and soon I had to depart. Often in the years after that I found myself in Rome, and each time I wrote out a formal request, but always in vain. Once, in 1934, I tried to make contact with Victor Emanuel directly when I saw him in a marketplace. It was a terrible mistake. The crowd pelted me with fruit and the police arrested me as a would-be assassin. Only the intercession of Schnabel, with whom I was just then traveling as tuner, saved me from an indefinite stay in one of the King's prisons. Schnabel managed to convince the authorities — but unfortunately not His Majesty — that I was only in love with one of the royal pianos."

In the Mediterranean campaigns of World War II Carmi was attached to an English transportation unit. Its specific task was to collect and sift the miscellany that Rommel's retreating forces had left behind. One day the ex-tuner was summoned to examine a peculiar looking piano — or what seemed to be a piano — that had been turned up in the dunes that morning. The mine-sweepers almost had blown it to bits on the theory that it might be some diabolical Nazi trap. The question was, was it?

Carmi concedes that "there did appear to be something Satanic in this strange apparatus. It was encased in a thick, desert-hardened layer of plaster from top to bottom, so that it more nearly resembled a tomb than anything else. If it were a piano, there could be no proving it then and there because the inside works were hopelessly sand-clogged. From both sides of the action it was possible to see that all manner of experiments had been made on it, and that it had been rebuilt at least once because the keyboard obviously had been extended and supplementary strings, hammers and keys added to the original set. Now why, I wondered, had Rommel's army taken the trouble to lug a museum piece into a combat zone?"

Having persuaded his superior that there was more than met the eyes in this situation, Carmi was soon off by truck to the ordnance headquarters some two hundred miles inside Egypt. No sooner had he arrived when the receiving officer ordered him to make an about-turn with his "rubbish", then relented to the extent of consigning it to the uttermost extremity of the camp — where everything was burned sooner or later.

Carmi was by no means sure that his unwieldy pile of booty had any real value, but he was, after all, a piano man, and the thought of relegating any instrument to flames was enough to excite his righteous indignation. He went to the officer in charge, presented his credentials as tuner-by-appointment to the most famous virtuosi, swore on his years of experience that the battlefield relic should be saved from destruction. Carmi's pleas convinced the officer in charge, who relented and turned the piano over to the British Special Service section.

The piano was repaired in short order — made to work well enough for military morale purposes at any rate. Carmi, his conscience assuaged, went back to his unit, and after that he lost sight of his precious charge for a long while. Subsequently he heard that it had been turned over to a troupe of entertainers who would be making the rounds of army installations, and later he encountered them — and their piano — all over North Africa, Sicily and Italy.

War and its aftermath having presented a succession of more pressing problems, Carmi eventually forgot the plastered mystery-box. But fate was to bring them together again. The piano had gone with the entertainers as far as Palestine, shortly to become Israel. When the troupe disbanded there, the instrument was written off and sold to a Tel-Aviv junk dealer.

Carmi continues the story: "It's an ill wind that blows nobody

good. Because of its low price, the piano time and again found owners who tried to unlock its secrets. None of them did. Then the notion struck somebody that maybe this thing was not really a piano after all. A bee-keeper saw it as ideal hive material; a peasant thought it would make a fine incubator; a butcher was sure that meat could be kept under refrigeration within its five-inch walls. And so it went, until the day came when the long-suffering piano was left to rot, in lonesome ignominy, abandoned by the junk dealer in the Tel-Aviv city dump.

"About that time I came home, my army career happily over. While I was telling my wife that I wanted to re-open the old piano workshop the children interrupted to say that they had found my first job for me, and at their insistence I went with them to investigate. As we entered the street I saw a turned-over upright baking in the sun; several youngsters were sitting irreverently on its back. They alighted at our approach, and I saw with a shock of recognition that this instrument was none other than my pal of years before. The plaster was incredibly intact, but otherwise the piano was battered beyond belief.

"I had always taught the children that a piano was a living thing, but this instrument was beyond repair. All the strings, keys, hammers, even the pedals had been removed. Only the plaster case and the sounding board remained. I was forced to tell my children that this piano could not be repaired. But that night my conscience so bothered me that I decided to return the next day to see what I could do with this old relic. When I arrived at the dump it was gone."

But he could not shake it off that easily: a few days later it turned up at his piano-repair shop. A music-loving plasterer had found it and handed Carmi an advance with orders to fix the instrument. Later, the plasterer changed his mind and demanded his money back. He demanded it vehemently. He pounded his fist on the piano. As he did so, the plaster casing cracked and the head and torso of a little wooden cherub came into view.

Carmi hurriedly handed over the money, then feverishly started to remove the rest of the plaster. Sluices of benzine, alcohol, vinegar and lemon juice failed to part plaster from wood, but 24 gallons of acetone finally did the trick. What emerged was an elaborately carved case, featuring a frieze of plump, drunken cherubs hauling their equally drunken queen across the piano. face with most unmusical leers. Carmi dug out an old picture of the king's piano. It was the same.

How had the piano found its way to North Africa in the first place? Presumably, some looting German soldiers had taken it along for their own troop entertainers. Still puzzling over the coincidences that had brought him the piano, Carmi set to work. Using the original, wafer-thin cypress wood sounding board as a guide, he painstakingly restored the piano, installed a new action and strings. The job took three years. In 1953, he arrived in the U.S. to show off his transformed desert pal.

Carmi is now in New York completing his forthcoming book. The "Siena Pianoforte" is with him. This recording was made on it. Hear for yourself the "divine sounds" that Liszt heard from its depths. David's harp it may not be, but the allusion surely does no disservice.

OTHER SIENA PIANOFORTE RECORDINGS

SCARLATTI Six Sonatas For Keyboard
MOZART Sonata in B Flat Major (K.333). CHARLES ROSEN, pianist. ESP-3000

BACH Chaconne; Partita No. 1; Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring; Sheep May Safely Graze; Adagio. ANATOLE KITAIN, pianist. ESP-3001

TURINA Danzas Gitanas. ALBENIZ Airs of Spain. VILLA-LOBOS The Baby's Family. MOMPOU Scenes d'Enfants. MARISA REGULES, pianist. ESP-3002

DEBUSSY Children's Corner; The Engulfed Cathedral; Ondine; L'Isle Joyeuse; Estampes; Etude; MARISA REGULES, pianist. ESP-3003

MOZART Sonata No. 11 in A (K.331); Sonata No. 4 in E Flat (K.282); Variations on a Theme of Gluck (K.455); KATHRYN DEGUIRE, pianist. ESP-3004

CHRISTMAS ON THE SIENA PIANOFORTE Popular Carols played by GRACE CASTAGNETTA ESP-3005

This album is available in Monaural 3003 and Stereo 53003

Counterpoint/Esoteric Records
1313 North Vine Street, Hollywood 28, California
SEND FOR FREE CATALOG