

Artis Wodehouse - Pulling out the Stops - Concert

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Pulling Out the Stops to Revive Keyboard Relics

Pianist Has Nearly a Dozen Antique Instruments; Concert Planned for Sunday

By

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Artis Wodehouse practices her harmonium at her home in the Bronx; she will perform for the public on Sunday. *Ramsay de Give for The Wall Street Journal*

The pianist Artis Wodehouse was passing a dumpster in Pelham, N.Y., when she spotted telltale black and white keys. "I saw this little keyboard in there that was in a black box," she said. "Of course, me being a mongo freak," or junk salvager, "I pulled it out." That Mason & Hamlin reed organ that Ms. Wodehouse came across in 2000 was the beginning of a love affair with the keyboard instruments that history left behind. Since then, Ms. Wodehouse has acquired nearly a dozen antique keyboard instruments—from Craigslist, eBay and other sources. Her collection's gem: a 1903 Mustel Art Harmonium, the only one of its kind in the New York area and one of only a handful in the U.S.

Harmoniums were popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, said [Paul Jacobs](#), who heads Juilliard's organ department. "Certainly the history of the harmonium and who

the harmonium has inspired is justification for our being aware of these instruments today and the potential they hold," he said.

Ms. Wodehouse, 68 years old, is playing her prized harmonium for a concert on Sunday; the performance is essentially a pitch to bring the once-popular reed organ out of obscurity.

The selections will include ones written for the instrument by composers such as Saint-Saëns, Villa-Lobos and Berlioz. Ms. Wodehouse is even playing Saint-Saëns duos with the pianist Andrew Sun, and the two musicians have spent more than a few hours rehearsing in her Bronx apartment, surrounded by the instruments.

"All right, bombs away!" she said, and then, accompanied by Mr. Sun's cascading scales, conjured an orchestra of sounds from the harmonium.

Her fingers danced over its keyboard, pulling out stops to change the tone, while her feet pumped the air into the instrument and knees controlled two airflow-adjusting panels.

For players, the harmonium's attraction is the subtlety of sound that they can shape. The player controls airflow, which means that—unlike on a piano or pipe organ—volume can increase or decrease within a single note, resulting in a wider range of expressions.

Mustel is, depending on who you ask, the Rolls-Royce, the Stradivarius or the Steinway of the harmonium.

Ms. Wodehouse has a background in historical performance, which she studied at Stanford and Yale universities. She was, she said, "a minor celebrity" for a time because of her work with Gershwin's piano rolls, the scrolling sheets of music that power player pianos. Her 1993 Nonesuch recording, "Gershwin Plays Gershwin: The Piano Rolls," reached the top of the Billboard classical charts and sold 300,000 copies—a hit for a classical album.

Tired of being pegged as "the Gershwin piano roll lady," she embarked on collecting, restoring, commissioning for and performing on historical keyboard instruments. Her collection comprises mostly American instruments, including an 1889 Mason & Hamlin Liszt organ and 1864 melodeon.

"They're part of this cultural heritage that has fallen off the face of the earth," Ms. Wodehouse said. "That's why I'm attracted to the whole field."

Her interest isn't merely preservation for preservation's sake. If the creation of instruments follows a Darwinian path, she admits there are some that merit extinction. She aims to revive repertoire, which, in the harmonium's case, is surprisingly broad.

"The instruments are just a vehicle for the musical thoughts of the great composers," she said.

"She's a little nuts," said organist Wayne Schneider, who teaches music history at the University of Vermont, of Ms. Wodehouse's proclivity toward lugging around the keyboard instruments, "and a pioneer in introducing this repertoire to American ears."



The stops on a 1903 Mustel Art Harmonium, owned by Artis Wodehouse, change the instrument's tone. *Ramsay de Give for The Wall Street Journal*

Where to Hear

Artis Wodehouse performs Sunday at Church of the Epiphany, 1393 York Ave.; 212-866-0468; gemsny.org.