

MUSEUM OF MUSIC AUTOMATONS SEEWEN SO

Dr. h.c. Heinrich Weiss-
Stauffacher collection



THE MELODIC MUSEUM



Guided Tour

THE BRITANNIC ORGAN

Scene 1

This compilation of imposing Britannic Organ, a **Philharmonic organ** of **M. Welte & Sons** in 1913/14, of recording apparatus of the same company, music rolls left and right in the room (in the front of the hall for the most part organ recording rolls) and instruments by **Welte**, is probably unique in the world, according to a main attraction of our museum.

We are located here in the Artistic Sound Hall. To the rear you see the stately Britannic organ, that has been in the possession of Heinrich Weiss or the collection of the museum since 1969/70. We only learned in the spring of 2007 that the organ was originally planned for the Britannic – a sister ship of the Titanic. More on that later.

Scene 2

Reproducing instruments, by Welte and music rolls. The company in Freiburg in the Breisgau was already renowned for its developments in the area of automated music reproduction using program carriers as well as for its orchestrions when it patented a reproduction process in 1904 for the reproducing piano it developed. It was launched in 1905 under the name "Mignon" and then a bit later as the "Welte Mignon" Reproducing Piano. This instrument used perforated paper rolls, the so-called note rolls or piano rolls. The technology was a joint development by Edwin Welte and Karl Bockisch.

Welte hired the most famous pianists at the time to create samples for the music rolls in Freiburg: Edvard Grieg or Gustav Mahler even played their own works!

The new system could even determine Forte or Piano and the pedals, in other words, the individual expression of the artist – and reproduced the same when played. You could say they invited the most famous pianists as quasi personal guests.

The list of customers, publicized by the Welte Co. as advertisement was a virtual European "Who's who". The royal houses of Italy, Belgium and Greece bought artistic pianos as did "the Right Honourable Winston Churchill, M.P." A little closer to home, the list included for example "Manufacturer Brown" in Baden (Brown-Boveri) or "Mrs. Page in Cham" (Nestlé-Angloswiss). A heavy wallet was required.

Over the years, **Welte** built up a repertoire of ca. 6,000 rolls. Our own collection here at the museum encompasses some 3,500 rolls. Concertanti make up only a small part of it; Symphonies and dance music were also recorded.

Scene 3

Britannic Organ and its music rolls. And now here it is: the long lost organ for the Britannic – i.e. the organ for the sister ship of the Titanic that sank in 1912. The instrument, which was documented in drawings and photographs, had disappeared for nearly a century. The discovery was made during the restoration of this **Welte Philharmonic Organ** in our museum in the spring of 2007. The contracted organ builder cleaned three parts not normally accessible below the museum organ's wind chest and each time found the same note stamped: "Britanik".

The organ was built in winter 1913/14 in Freiburg in the Breisgau for the Britannic, then it must have been installed there in the Spring of 1914. The **Welte** company must have removed and stored the organ again since conditions deteriorated dramatically with the outbreak of the First World War in the summer of 1914 forcing the ship to be converted.

Speculation arose numerous times over the past few years about the organs on the sister ships of the Olympic class. The Olympic, completed in 1911, was originally planned without an organ. The ship was, however, so well received by travelers across the north Atlantic route, that the designers wanted to come up with something to increase the comfort of passengers on the Titanic – completed in the spring of 1912. In all likelihood, the order for a pneumatic organ arrived around this time at the **Welte** company in Freiburg, who had already garnered international fame with its instruments at world expositions of the time. Perhaps there were plans for installing a **Welte Philharmonic Organ**, the latest achievement of the company at the time. Nevertheless, in the short period between the time the order arrived and the maiden voyage of the Titanic there was only enough time to attempt to implement a project using a small salon organ. Even this organ could not, however, be manufactured in a timely manner, so that it never played on the high seas. The so-called Titanic Organ – an orchestrion without a console – can be admired today in the Deutsches Musikautomatenmuseum (German Museum of Music Automatons) in Bruchsal.

Yet another climax was planned for the third sister ship of the Olympic class, which was originally christened as the Gigantic. After the loss of the Titanic on April 15, 1912, this oceanic giant was quickly renamed the Britannic– the Greek names having failed to bring any luck. The keel was laid even before the Titanic disaster in December 1911

of the third ship of this size. The launch was delayed after the Titanic disaster until February 26, 1914. The plans were most likely revised during this period and the ship's safety once again discussed. The plans to install a **Welte Philharmonic Organ** were in all likelihood not changed much, so that we may assume that the **Welte** company began building the organ for the Britannic in 1913. A large organ, more than two stories high, was planned for the stairwell of the first class to uplift and entertain the passengers.

The First World War broke out at the end of 1914 and the British Admiralty seized all large passenger ships for use as troop transports or hospital ships. The Britannic was also converted by December 1915 and then served for some 11 months thereafter. As a swimming hospital, the ship hit a German sea mine off the island of Kea in the Aegean Sea on November 21, 1916 without ever transporting a single civilian passenger or having travelled its planned North Atlantic route. A picture of this period of war service shows the stairwell of the Britannic in absolute rough construction with naked, white painted metal walls. Wooden parts from the streamliner's stairwell did, however, emerge in later years among collectors suggesting the interior work of the Britannic was quite advanced at the time the ship was seized in July 1914. And also from the summer of 1914 is an illustration in a catalog by the **Welte** company with the corresponding drawings, which document that an instrument roughly the size of the **Welte Philharmonic Organ** was installed on the Britannic. Illustration and drawings proved the existence of the organ, but other references and the actual organ itself could not be found for a long time: The inscription "WELTE-PHILHARMONIE-ORGEL auf S.S. Britannic der White Star Line" (WELTE PHILHARMONIC ORGAN on the S.S. Britannic of the White Star Line") suggest, however, the organ was probably on the ship.

Of course, the organ could no longer be installed on the sunken Britannic as previously planned. Here the trail goes cold: No documentation can be found on the part of the ship's constructor, Harland & Wolff in Irish Belfast as well as by the **Welte** company on the whereabouts of the organ.

Around 1920, the Stuttgart camera manufacturer August Nagel (1882-1943) installed a **Welte Philharmonic Organ** in his sumptuous villa. As a lover of music, he could afford an organ from the world-famous company located in neighboring Freiburg. An instrument of this kind was an exceptional luxury found in the villas of industrial magnates or residencies of the aristocracy of the time. Yet there were an impressive number of comparable organs, as illustrated by the customer list from the **Welte** company. For some unknown reason, Nagel returned the organ to the manufacturer in Freiburg. At the initiative of Eugen Kersting (1888-1958), the organ was installed in

1937 in the reception room of the Radium electric light bulb company. The young – at the time – organ builder Werner Bosch (1916-1992) enhanced the organ in the services of the **Welte** company by a few registers and installed it in Wipperfürth where it remained in use into the 1960's. Bosch maintained the organ after the Second World War and even after **Welte** closed its operations (as an independent organ builder). In 1961 for example, a record produced used the still operating **Welte Philharmonic Organ** in Wipperfürth to record the music rolls recorded by the composer Max Reger in 1913 on the recording organ in Freiburg. They were released under the title "Max Reger spielt eigene Orgelwerke" (Max Reger plays his own organ work) or later as "Regel plays Reger" worldwide. The instrument turned out to be the best suited instrument for these recordings and largely corresponded in its registers with the recording organ in Freiburg played by Reger. After a change in management in Wipperfürth, the company searched long in vain for a buyer of the organ as it intended to turn the reception room into a warehouse. Finally, Heinrich Weiss, the founder of the Museum of Musical Automats Seewen, became aware of the instrument and acquired it for his collection. After moving the organ to Switzerland, Weiss invested some 1,500 hours rebuilding the organ and hired Werner Bosch to tune it. The ceremonial dedication of the organ took place on May 30, 1970 in Seewen. Bosch himself was so impressed by the collection in Seewen and the rescue of "his" **Welte Philharmonic Organ**, that he offered for sale the 1230 master rolls by the **Welte** Company in his possession. And so it is that the Museum of Musical Automats Seewen not only owns an exceptional instrument with an unusual history, but also has the corresponding original recordings to go with it in the museum's collection. In addition to Max Reger, music rolls of renowned artists of the time were immortalized including Harry Goss-Custard, Edwin Lemare, Alfred Hollins, Joseph Bonnet, William Wolstenholme, Eugène Gigout, Clarence Eddy, Marco Enrico Bossi, Karl Straube or Günter Ramin.

We had to remove and store the organ in 1998 as part of restoration work after some 30 years' service. The museum was renovated at the time and expanded; reopening in 2002 with additional space. The museum's main attraction remained, however, in storage. The restoration of the organ was only planned for 2006, to be completed in late summer of 2007. It was during this restoration work that the inscriptions referring to the Britannic were discovered.

The organ here in the large ArtisticSound Hall is once again a key part of our collection and will be used for concerts as well. The restored **Welte Philharmonic Organ** of the

Museum of Musical Automaton or the Britannic from 1913/14 with the corresponding original recordings is a highly valuable instrument from a musical-historical perspective. The music rolls can be reproduced on a nearly authentic instrument, which allows us to draw conclusions about the performance techniques in a period where virtually no organ recordings were made for records.

The evidence suggests that this organ was supposed to serve aboard the Britannic, but appears to have been removed in the summer of 1914 and stored at **Welte** in Freiburg – where it experienced the sinking of the ship and the end of the First World War. From the sheer size, the organ was considerably larger than the one we know of from the Titanic. It is remarkable that both organs somehow managed to avoid their fates. Instead of lying at the bottom of the ocean both have now made it to dry dock, far, far away from the ocean's grasp. The museum in Seewen is 610 meters above sea level!