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MUSICAL BOXES AT THE NOUVELLE SOCIÉTÉ HELVÉTIQUE

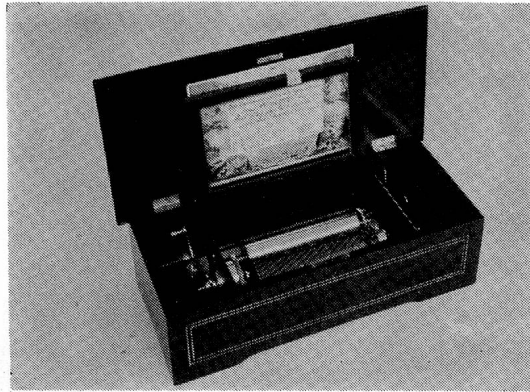
A NATIVE OF SAINTE-CROIX SPEAKS OF MUSICAL BOXES

An appreciative audience enjoyed a refreshing exposé on an original subject at the January monthly meeting of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique. Mr. Lucien Paillard, Deputy Director of the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad, gave a fascinating talk on the history of musical boxes illustrated by a collection of items, recordings, and a film.

Coming from Sainte-Croix, the birthplace of the musical box—and still thriving today on the manufacture of melodious little chalets sold all over the world—Mr. Paillard was well qualified to develop this subject.

Mr. Paillard said that the musical box industry came into its own at Sainte Croix during the 18th and 19th century. Beginning as a home occupation helping peasants to supplement the meagre revenue of their land, it eventually led to the operation of workshops. This development closely followed the growth of the Industrial Revolution. That musical boxes should have found their birthplace at Sainte Croix was due to the competition from watchmakers in Geneva and other areas of the Jura. When several enterprising men sought to bring prosperity to Sainte Croix, they found instead profitable openings for musical boxes.

The speaker said that the underlying idea of all musical boxes, namely, the



*Classical
19th-century
musical
box.*

production of a musical sound without direct manual actuation, appeared for the first time in the 14th century with mechanically operated chimes. The functioning of these devices rested on the invention of the spiked cylinder setting different beaters in motion. The first developments of the musical boxes as we know them today, called “*serinettes*”, were designed to teach birds, in particular canaries, to sing. The rotating cylinder actuated a system of bellows. Later progress saw the use of a grating of “tines” vibrating against the spikes of the rotating cylinder. This system, still used in musical boxes today, was invented by a Geneva watchmaker named Antoine Favre.

The Speaker played recordings of several large musical boxes built in the second half of the 19th century. He also played recordings of street organs and mechanical pianos, both of which work along similar lines. Mr. Paillard said that the spiked cylinder had played in music a role similar to that of the wheel in the history of transport. Five hundred years after its invention, the spiked cylinder was superseded by the gramophone record, which, originally, also had the form of a cylinder. At approximately the same time, a Leipzig firm had the idea of substituting the spiked cylinders by a spiked disc which could readily be changed. This device and Edison’s historic invention incorporate all the aspects of the modern gramophone record.

The firms at Sainte Croix knew how to take these developments into their stride. They modernised and adapted to the spiked disc. Today, musical boxes are of course no longer considered as a means of reproducing hits or popular tunes. They are considered rather as amusing gifts, souvenirs or gadgets. This functional transformation drastically reduced the size of musical boxes. It should be difficult nowadays to buy musical boxes with 50 cm long cylinders of mid 19th century pattern.

Although musical boxes are no longer the important export item they were at the end of the last century, when the production of Sainte-Croix sold from California to the Far East, they still contribute to the prosperity of this Jura town.

Mr. Paillard’s exposé was followed by a film. Through no fault of his own, the sound was missing. He extricated himself from this situation with a clever running commentary. If one had not known that the sound should be there, one would never have noticed.



Luxury musical box manufactured in St. Croix in 1900.