

Mechanical

A Brief History of Mechanical Singing Birds

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, wonderful and exceptionally varied mechanical singing bird pieces were created for an extremely appreciative elite. These pieces, true *objets d'art*, took on many forms, limited only by the imaginations of their creators. Among them are suspended bird cages with a clock dial visible underneath, mirrors, ornate snuffboxes of all sizes and shapes, and even jeweled pistols, which when fired release tiny birds that flutter their wings and sing a serenade before returning to their "nests" within the precious enameled barrel of the pistol.

Made by highly specialized artisans, these small masterpieces are a superb blend of art and horology. Most were a product of Geneva's famous *fabrique d'horlogerie et de bijouterie*, (*Industry of clock and jewelry making") or, as it was more commonly called, *la fabrique*, which dominated economic and social life in the city of Calvin. The loose organization, and the relative lack of importance of signatures, are aspects of the *fabrique* which are difficult for us to understand today: In

effect, a signature does not necessarily indicate the maker; it is often the name of the retailer. During the 18th and 19th centuries, it was common practice for the retailer to request that only his name appear.

Why did these exceptional pieces take the form of mechanical singing birds? The reason can be traced back to the seventeenth century, when it had become the fashion in Europe to raise canary birds, prized for their colorful plumage and their beautiful song. This trend lasted throughout the 18th century and even beyond. It was so popular that certain noblewomen went so far as to forget their rank, buying and selling birds, and thereby engaging in commerce, which was forbidden to those of their station in life.

During the seventeenth century, the birds were imported from the Canary Islands, later, they were raised in continental Europe, by specialists who

regularly organized their transport cross country. Raising birds and teaching them to sing was an extremely difficult and time-consuming enterprise. The most famous of all professors was Hervieux de Chanteloup, "governor of the canaries of Madame the Princess of Condé". He wrote an authoritative book with a title in the style of the period: "New Treatise of Canary Birds, containing the manner of raising them, mating them to obtain the most beautiful races, with remarks as curious as they are necessary on the signs and causes of their Maladies and secrets of curing them". This Bible of canary-raising was reedited three times during the eighteenth century.

Hervieux devotes entire and extremely detailed chapters to their care, feeding, and training.

The teaching of singing was not to be taken lightly:

"Fifteen days after your Canary is weaned, or rather, as soon as you notice it beginning to twitter... you must immediately isolate it from the others, & you must place it in a Cage covered with a very light-colored cloth for the first eight days. You must remove it to a Room far from all the other

Birds, whichever they may be, so that it never hears the song of any other Bird, & after you will play on a small Flageolet, whose tone is not too high. For if your Flageolet is too high, your Canary will unfailingly sing it in the same key, & repeating it several times a day, will dry out its lungs so severely that it will soon wither away and die."

Hervieux hurries to reassure the reader: "One should not believe that the greater the number of lessons given to Canaries, the faster they will progress; the Enthusiast will only exhaust himself & fatigue his Canaries. Five or six lessons a day suffice to instruct a Canary if he has any disposition to learn. Any more, and the trouble would much surpass the pleasure, if one had to be continually after one's Canaries." It was only necessary, he advised, to give "two lessons in the morning upon rising, one in the middle of the day, & as many in the evening before going to bed". During these lessons, the tune



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had to be played nine or ten times over, from beginning to end, if the bird was to learn it correctly.

Small wonder, then, that canary owners wearied of carrying the burden of their birds' education all alone. Relief was found in the form of a small portable organ called the "serinette", which became popular toward the middle of the 18th century. Rather than exhaust themselves by playing tunes over and over on the flageolet, with the serinette they needed only to turn a handle in order to produce music. (One understands why the verb "seriner" - "serin" means "canary" in French - came to mean "to repeat tirelessly or automatically").

The serinette is a small mechanical organ with a pinned cylinder, organ pipes and a bellows. It came originally from the east of France, principally from the region of Mirecourt, where it was made by farmers during the long winters. Later, encouraged by the growing popularity of the instrument, some makers moved to Paris, where more elegant instruments were in demand by a wealthier clientele.

At first only an auxiliary to the musical education of canaries, the serinette soon became associated with mechanical birds. Clocks embellished with bird cages and added serinettes began to appear at luxury jewelers, and chandelier cages soon became all the rage. Elegant ladies rivalized to possess the most extraordinary of them, and the addition of a mechanical musical bird represented a major attraction. For example, among the possessions of the Marquise of Châtelet sold on December 11, 1749, there was "a chandelier cage, in which there is a canary which whistles six different tunes".

Singing birds in suspended cages with serinette appeared toward the middle of the century. In 1758, while he was biding his time in Madrid, waiting to be summoned to show his mechanical pieces to the King of Spain, Pierre Jaquet Droz busied himself

with the repair of one of these: "Jaquet Droz is overhauling the serinette of the Canary belonging to M., whose organs and carillon he has repaired, and to whom he sent the Bill yesterday, amounting to 93 French livres." As late as 1789, the Jaquet Droz and Leschot account books mention "two snuff boxes with serinettes, by Frisard".

In 1792, an extraordinary piece was sent to Constantinople. This was an "astronomical clock with serinette and canary, a masterpiece perhaps unique in its genre." In 1796, the firm of Courvoisier and Houriet sent flasks with a serinette to the Jaquet Droz' associate Leschot for repair. Nevertheless, the

reign of the serinette had come to an end. A new era was beginning, an era of miniaturization and precision, of riches and masterpieces.



For though delightful, the serinette was bulky, and in addition did not give a convincing imitation of bird song. A novel idea would soon revolutionize the world of bird automata: the whistle with sliding piston, which produced a much more natural and pleasing effect. This invention is generally attributed to the Jaquet Droz,

father and son. They, along with their assistant and later associate Jean-Frédéric Leschot, and the brilliant artisan Jacob Frisard, were the masters of singing birds during the second half of the eighteenth century. The agility of this whistle made it possible to copy real bird song. It was the general practice during the period to alternate "natural" song with a short tune, which gave a very pleasing effect.

Singing bird pieces have always been great rarities which required exceptional skill and artistry to create. They were always destined for the happy few. How fortunate we are today that a few of these delicate and precious creations have survived, for our enjoyment and delight.

Bibliography: Sharon and Christian Bailly, *Flights of Fancy*, Antiquorum Editions, 2001.