

Guide to the Thomas McKee Papers, ca. 1890-1933

JPB 06-48

Music Division

**The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts
New York, New York**

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Descriptive Summary

Title:	Thomas McKee Papers
Collection ID:	JPB 06-48
Creator:	McKee, Thomas
Extent:	3.08 linear feet (3 boxes)
Repository:	Music Division. The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Abstract:

Thomas McKee was a citizen of Great Britain who in the 1900s lived in Portland, Oregon and New York City. He received two patents related to automatic player pianos. Though not a musician and apparently unable to read music, in the early 1930s, McKee wrote a book titled *The Language of Music* utilizing research including materials from Carroll Brent Chilton. This book described how music was inaccessible to those not trained in music and then explained how a new player piano could become a teaching tool for the masses. The book also served as a business perspective designed to present his new designs for the player piano and solicit interest in his designs. His attempts were apparently unsuccessful.

Administrative Information

Access

Collection is open to the public. Library policy on photocopying will apply. Advance notice may be required.

Publication Rights

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Preferred Citation

Thomas McKee Papers, JPB 06-48 Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Processing Information

The collection was processed and cataloged in 2007.

Biographical Note

Thomas McKee was a citizen of Great Britain who in the 1900s lived in Portland, Oregon and New York City. Though not a musician and apparently unable to read music, he received two patents related to automatic player pianos.

In a 1933 letter to D. S. MacColl, Thomas McKee explained that he had once been a part of the grain trade and the Panama Canal, but had left it due to the troubles in Europe. For unknown reasons, McKee turned to the field of music specifically related to automatic player pianos. In the same letter, McKee claimed to have fought and won a lawsuit related to his patents. He also said he had written his book “to try and get the Nobel Prize” so he could use the money to create a “complete working model” made of his instrument.*

United States Patent 1,398,107 patented on November 22, 1921 was applied for on May 20, 1890 with Serial No. 497, 156. This was renewed July 29, 1920 under Serial No. 399,888. This patent primarily concerned the operation of perforated sheet music for automatic player pianos.

United States Patent 1,580,438 patented on April 13, 1926 was applied for on December 10, 1908 with Serial No. 466,788. This was renewed June 27, 1921 under Serial No. 480,720 ½ . This patent concerned the device that maneuvered the perforated piano sheet music through the piano.

In the 1920s through the 1930s, Thomas McKee was in contact with Carroll Brent Chilton of the Audible Music Text Society and the Aeolian Company and author of *The De-Assification of Music: A Propagandist Magazine of One Number Containing News of Importance to all Music Lovers, Especially to all Owners of Player Pianos*. In the 1920s, McKee wrote to the business associates of numerous businessmen, musicians, and philanthropists such as Henry Ford, Irving Berlin, Otto H. Kahn, and Douglas Fairbanks apparently hoping to solicit interest in his designs. In the early 1930s, McKee wrote a book titled *The Language of Music* utilizing research including materials from Chilton. This book described how music was inaccessible to those not trained in music and then explained how a new player piano could become a teaching tool for the masses. The book also served as a business perspective designed to present his new designs for the player piano and solicit interest in his designs. His attempts were apparently unsuccessful.

In 1932, McKee wrote several letters attempting to interest buyers in “Vit-O-Weat” and “Wole-O-Weat” cereals sealed and then cooked in their cans in order to preserve minerals and chemical elements.

*McKee to D. S. MacColl 22 July 1933. See Correspondence.

Scope and Content Note

The Thomas McKee Papers contain materials related to his player piano patents and his attempts to promote his designs through *The Language of Music*. Materials include correspondence, patents, clippings, and publicity materials.

Of interest are the correspondence related to McKee's attempts to gain funding for his patents and book as well as his manuscript copy of *The Language of Music*. Correspondence with Carroll Brent Chilton of the Audible Music Text Society and the Aeolian Company and Chilton's writings provide context for McKee's work. Correspondence with player piano roll businesses provides some detail into the creation and business of automatic player pianos.

Organization

The collection is organized into 2 series. They are:

Series I: Professional Papers, ca. 1890-1933

Series II: Oversized, ca. 1921-1933

Series Descriptions

Series I: Professional Papers, ca. 1890-1933

1 box

Arrangement: Alphabetical.

Materials related to McKee's research in player pianos and his attempts at soliciting interest in his designs through correspondence and through his book, *The Language of Music*. Series includes copies of Carroll Brent Chilton's writings providing context for McKee's work. Also contains reference patents concerning automatic player pianos and permissions for McKee to utilize other author's work in his book.

Series II: Oversized, ca. 1921-1933

2 boxes

Arrangement: Alphabetical.

The series contains McKee's two volume draft of *The Language of Music*. The book is hand typed with pencil revisions and contains citations and illustrations pasted into the text. The series also includes scrapbook pages containing oversized patents and correspondence papers. Of interest are correspondence between McKee and player piano roll companies which provide some information about the automatic player piano business. In addition, the series contains correspondence between McKee and the associates of numerous businessmen, musicians, and philanthropists such as Henry Ford, Irving Berlin, Otto H. Kahn, and Douglas Fairbanks whom McKee apparently hoped to interest in his designs.

Series I: Professional Papers, ca. 1890-1933

Chilton, Carroll Brent

Box 1

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|-------|---|
| F. 1 | Business card from the Intrinsic Music Center, undated (Inscribed Mr. Albert (?).)
<i>The De-Assification of Music: A Propagandist Magazine of One Number Containing News of Importance to all Music Lovers, Especially to all Owners of Player Pianos</i> , 1922 (C. B. Chilton, Intrinsic Music Foundation) |
| F. 2 | Annotated, undated |
| F. 3 | Annotated with specific copy information, undated (Cover reads "Please read this book first," "Please return to me as this is about the only copy I now have left," and "Kindly see page 21 -TM." Missing pages 19-22. With loose covered image of player piano annotated "copyrighted must not be published.")
<i>The New Music Education: Practical Music Instruction for all through Audible Music Books. Specimen pages of Audiscript scores with brief descriptive text from "The Graphic Method of Musical Instruction" by Carroll Brent Chilton</i> , 1925 (Published by the Audible Music Text Society.) |
| F. 4 | Annotated copy, undated |
| F. 5 | Copy, 1925 |
| F. 6 | Inscribed copy, undated (Inscribed "With compliments -Thos McKee.") |
| | Clippings |
| F. 7 | <i>Audiographic Music for the Duo-Art Reproducing Piano</i> , 1927 |
| F. 8 | <i>Audiographic Music and the Duo-Art Piano</i> , 1928 |
| | Correspondence |
| | Copyright permissions (Permissions sought and granted regarding McKee's desire to utilize work in his <i>The Language of Music</i> .) |
| F. 9 | A-D, 1933 |
| F. 10 | G-J, 1933 |
| F. 11 | L-W, 1933 |
| F. 12 | McKee to MacColl, D. S., 1933 (Letter is significant in that it details McKee's reasoning for creating <i>The Language of Music</i> .) |
| F. 13 | McKee to Mowbray, Frank, H., 1933 (Correspondence regarding copyright permission and lists of manuscript submission information.) |
| F. 14 | E., J. <i>The Music of Life: A Selection of Thoughts</i> , 1918 (Compiled by J. E.) |
| F. 15 | List of parties who asked for a copy of book if published, undated |
| F. 16 | List of parties sent copies of Mr. Chilton's books, undated |
| | Patents, ca. 1890-1920 (Patents concerning player-pianos primarily from Great Britain and the United States.) |
| F. 17 | A-M |
| F. 18 | S-Y |
| | Photographs and Illustrations |
| | Illustrations |

Box/Folder	Description
F. 19	Advertising images, undated (Non McKee)
F. 20	Book pages 31 with pasted in illustrations of Audiscript and player roll scores, undated (Annotated with "use new photo only and add digest of all comments.")
F. 21	Card copies of photographs, undated
F. 22	Player piano tracing, undated
	Photographs
F. 23	Extra prints of photos in book, ca. 1933
F. 24	Player pianos, undated (With copyright annotations.)
F. 25	General, undated
F. 26	Wole-O-Weat and Vit-O-Weat correspondence, 1932 (Photocopy of correspondence attempting to solicit interest in this cereal cooked in cans. See verso E. P. Dutton & Co, 1933 in Copyright permissions A-D in Correspondence.)

Series II: Oversized, ca. 1921-1933

Box 2

F. 1-2 *The Language of Music*, ca. 1933 (Hand typed and placed in three- ring binder. Includes pasted in clipping and illustrations.)

Box 3

F. 1-3 Scrapbook pages, ca. 1921-1933 (Includes patents, correspondence with musicians and philanthropists, notes and clippings concerning McKee's interest in player-pianos and his attempts to secure interest and funding for his book or ideas. Includes correspondence with the associates of numerous businessmen, musicians, and philanthropists such as Henry Ford, Irving Berlin, Otto H. Kahn, and Douglas Fairbanks.)