

# Musical duo are boxing clever

Dealership devoted to tuneful mechanical items that please 'the eye, the touch and the ear'

by Frances Allitt

With more than 35 years' collecting experience each, Mark Singleton and Steve Greatrex have launched **Silvertone Music Boxes**, a dealership devoted to mechanical music.

The pair met around 30 years ago when Greatrex, in the process of saving up for a new music box, advertised a piece from his collection and Singleton showed up to buy it. Their meeting launched a friendship that has long involved a dream to start a specialist business.

Finally, though Greatrex is based in Plymouth and Singleton in Lancashire, the dealership has become a reality.

Both long-standing members of The Musical Box Society of Great Britain, the two men aim to raise the profile of their specialist area through education as well as sales.

"The music box is a pinnacle of design and construction that pleases the eye, the touch and the ear," says Singleton. "It's also a time machine. It delivers the exact live performance that our ancestors heard."

These instruments have been around for hundreds of years and are generally considered to have reached a high point during the 19th century. Sounds are typically produced using a 'programme' pinned on wooden barrels or metal cylinders or punched on discs or strips of metal, card or paper.

### Once regular auctions

Until the early 2010s, auctions in the field were regular fixtures at Phillips and Bonhams, but these, like other specialist sales, have now fallen by the wayside. And, the pair agree, the attention paid to mechanical clocks has – frustratingly – overshadowed that given to mechanical music.

"There are some incredible investment opportunities out there," says Singleton. "Yes, there's a lot of mass-produced, run-of-the-mill stuff. But the odd great work of art does turn up."

The two collectors first approached the world of mechanical music from a different angles. Greatrex's interest started with large disc and cylinder boxes and the reproducing piano. Singleton went for table disc boxes and later, more elaborate cylinder music boxes. But



**Right:** this Bruguier singing bird box automaton is an early example of its type and is supplied with its original transit case.

It is offered for a price in the region of **£37,500**.



### Chippendale link

Mark Singleton (left) and Steve Greatrex (right) shown with a Chippendale-cased George Pyke Barrel organ (inset: a detail of the organ).

Singleton says: "In this tercentenary year of Thomas Chippendale's birth, it's fitting that this piece should be offered, not having been on the open market in living memory."

Clockmaker and organ builder George Pyke commissioned the furniture maker to build cases for his pieces. This 1772 piece is believed to be the most complex that Pyke ever built and the case, Singleton adds, is almost certainly from the workshop of Chippendale.

"We welcome input from any authority who can show why it is not," he says.

The only other example sold for 430 guineas 120 years ago, making the organ difficult to price, but Silvertone is looking for offers in the region of **£250,000**.

offer top pieces (such as the Pyke barrel organ, see **above right**) on the 'Stock' page. The platform also includes a 'Classified' section where users can post lower-value pieces for free, while collectors are also invited to (anonymously) display prize pieces on the 'Collections' page for users to admire.

### Wider audience

Meanwhile they are building up their YouTube channel (also titled Silvertone Music Boxes) posting videos of the pieces in action. They encourage collectors to contribute their own examples so that a wider audience can hear and watch the workings of these objects.

Ensuring that these objects are used regularly is a key point in their care.

"These objects are better when they're played," Greatrex says.

"Leave a car in your garage for 20 years, it probably won't work when you try to start it."

He worries about the large collections stored at some national museums in crates. As a better example he names the polyphon at the National Trust's Overbeck's seaside house in Devon. Played several times a day, it has recently been restored for the first time in 120 years, he says.

Future plans include participation in fairs. For now, the pair focus on spreading the word about mechanical music in general as well as their website.

"We'll be pooling our experience in regards to shipping," Singleton says. "I've moved loads of music boxes and I know all about it. We'll ship anything across the planet".

silvertonemusicboxes.co.uk