

THE PLACE OF ROLLOS VICTORIA IN THE GLOBAL PLAYER PIANO INDUSTRY: INNOVATION, EXPANSION AND FORGOTTEN RECORDINGS (1905-1929)

EL PAPEL DE ROLLOS VICTORIA EN LA INDUSTRIA GLOBAL DE LA PIANOLA: INNOVACIÓN, EXPANSIÓN Y GRABACIONES OLVIDADAS (1905-1929)

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Abstract:

This article re-examines the role of Rollos Musicales Victoria, a Catalan piano roll manufacturer based in La Garriga, within the global player piano industry between 1905 and 1929. Drawing on unpublished archival materials, personal correspondence and oral testimony, it reconstructs the company's international ambitions, its technical innovations and its underexplored use of recording technologies. Particular attention is paid to the Blancafort brothers' journeys to the United States and Europe, revealing key insights into Victoria's production processes and commercial strategy. The study also uncovers compelling evidence that direct roll recording from the piano —long assumed absent in Spain— was indeed tested and employed at the company's facilities, although never publicised. By combining perspectives from musicology, media archaeology and the history of technology, this article challenges centre-periphery narratives and positions Rollos Victoria as a case study in local ingenuity and artistic experimentation within a transnational context.

Keywords:

Rollos Victoria, player piano, music roll, Manuel Blancafort, metronomic roll, hand-played roll.

Resumen:

Este artículo reexamina el papel de Rollos Musicales Victoria, una empresa catalana de fabricación de rollos de pianola con sede en La Garriga, dentro de la industria global de la pianola entre 1905 y 1929. A partir de materiales de archivo inéditos, correspondencia personal y testimonios orales, se reconstruyen las ambiciones internacionales de la empresa, sus innovaciones técnicas y su uso poco explorado de tecnologías de grabación. Se presta especial atención a los viajes de los hermanos Blancafort a Estados Unidos y Europa, que revelan aspectos clave sobre los procesos de producción y la estrategia comercial de Victoria. El estudio también saca a la luz pruebas convincentes de que la grabación directa en rollo desde el piano —largamente considerada inexistente en España— fue en realidad probada y empleada en las instalaciones de la empresa, aunque nunca se publicitó. Al combinar perspectivas de la musicología, la arqueología de los medios y la historia de la tecnología, este artículo cuestiona las narrativas centro-periferia y presenta el caso de Rollos Victoria como un ejemplo de ingenio local y experimentación artística en un contexto transnacional.

Palabras clave:

Rollos Victoria, pianola, rollos musicales, Manuel Blancafort, rollos metronómicos, rollos grabados.

Received: 29-05-2025. **Accepted:** 08-09-2025. **Published:** 15-01-2026

Citation / Cómo citar: Roquer, Jordi. «The Place of Rollos Victoria in the Global Player Piano Industry: Innovation, Expansion and Forgotten Recordings (1905-1929)». *Anuario Musical* 80 (2025): 608. <https://doi.org/10.3989/anuariomusical.2025.80.608>.

1. INTRODUCTION

The international history of the player piano industry remains largely dominated by narratives focused on American and central European companies. Yet, during the first decades of the twentieth century, several local initiatives flourished across Europe, playing a significant —if often overlooked— role in the production and dissemination of piano rolls. One such initiative was Rollos Musicales Victoria, based in La Garriga, a small town near Barcelona. Founded in 1905 by Joan Baptista Blancafort, father of composer Manuel Blancafort, the company developed imaginative adaptations of industrial production systems observed abroad, applying them with local ingenuity to achieve remarkable results —both in terms of roll quality and production volume.

Drawing on unpublished archival materials preserved at the Biblioteca de Catalunya (BC hereafter), this article offers a detailed account of the international development and technological singularities of Rollos Victoria, with a particular focus on the period between 1923 and 1927 —years marked by international expansion and intense experimentation. Special attention is given to the brothers Manuel and Anton Blancafort's trips to New York, Rome and Paris, which offer an exceptional lens through which to observe the company's efforts to refine its methods, strengthen its commercial networks, and navigate the complex landscape of transnational competition. One of the most significant contributions of this study is the reassessment of Victoria's approach to roll-making, with new evidence confirming that automatic recording from the piano —long assumed absent in Spain— was in fact available at the company's facilities in La Garriga. However, this technology was never used as a commercial selling point, and no hand-played rolls appear to have been released to the market. Although Spain generally lacked the complex industrial infrastructure required to record rolls directly from the piano, the case of Victoria stands out as an exception. This article puts forward operational hypotheses to help explain why this capacity remained underexploited, and situates Rollos Victoria as a case study for reassessing dominant narratives in the international history of the player piano.

1.1. Literature Review and Methodological Approach

The historiography of the player piano has long been dominated by studies centred on the United States and Central Europe. Standard works such as Larry Sitsky's *The Classical Reproducing Piano Roll* (1990) and William Braid White's early manual *Player-Piano Up-to-Date* (1914) helped to consolidate a narrative in which American companies —particularly the Aeolian Company and the QRS Music Company— appeared as the unquestioned leaders of the roll market. Research carried out by the Pianola Institute, especially through *The Pianola Journal* (London, since 1988), has played a crucial role in documenting the industrial history of Aeolian, QRS and other manufacturers. The work of scholars such as Rex Lawson and Denis Hall has been particularly influential in establishing the centrality of U.S. and European production within the international historiography of the player piano. Parallel research in Germany has emphasised the role of firms such as Welte and Hupfeld, especially in the development of reproducing technologies. French contributions are usually represented through the Édition Musicale Perforée (EMP), while Italy has received attention thanks to specialised cataloguing projects such as Carlo Bianchini and Pietro Zappalà's study of F.I.R.S.T. rolls (2013). Within this international landscape, the Spanish or Catalan case has rarely been taken into account, except tangentially in surveys of mechanical music.

Against this background, the present article seeks to reassess Rollos Victoria not only as a local enterprise, but also as a case study in the transnational circulation of technologies and practices. This approach draws on perspectives from media archaeology and the history of technology. Authors such as Wolfgang Ernst (*Digital Memory and the Archive*, 2013), Siegfried Zielinski (*Deep Time of the Media*, 2006) and Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (*Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, 2011) have emphasised the need to examine forgotten or marginal technologies in order to question dominant historical narratives. Their methodological stance invites us to regard the Catalan case not as an anecdotal exception, but as part of a wider constellation of media practices that challenge the conventional centre-periphery divide.

From the perspective of the history of technology, this study also resonates with the work of Thomas Hughes (*Networks of Power*, 1983) and Rosalind Williams (*Retooling: A Historian Confronts Technological Change*, 2002), who

have stressed the importance of local adaptation, users and networks in shaping technological modernity. Applying these insights to Rollos Victoria allows us to situate the factory at La Garriga not merely as a provincial manufacturer, but as an active participant in technological experimentation and cultural modernity in early twentieth-century Catalonia.

Methodologically, the article combines musicological analysis with archival research and oral testimony. This triangulation makes it possible to place local evidence in dialogue with broader historiographical debates. The archival sources —letters, catalogues and technical notes preserved at the Biblioteca de Catalunya— provide factual detail about production processes and commercial negotiations. Oral testimony, notably the recollections of Enric Basset regarding his grandfather's work at the factory, offers an additional layer of insight into technological experimentation. By setting these materials against the dominant Anglo-American and Central European narratives identified above, the study demonstrates how Rollos Victoria contributes to a more plural understanding of the player piano industry and its global networks.

2. THE ORIGINS AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF ROLLOS VICTORIA

Rollos Musicales Victoria was established in La Garriga in 1905 by Joan Baptista Blancafort, a businessman and owner of the town's prestigious spa. Located in a region marked by a growing bourgeoisie and a vibrant cultural scene, the company emerged at a time of economic optimism and technological enthusiasm. Unlike most European roll producers, Victoria was not an urban-based enterprise. Its semi-rural location did not hinder its ambition; rather, it shaped a distinctive model of production that combined artisanal care with increasingly systematic manufacturing processes. Known locally as *La Solfa*, the factory operated within the Blancafort family estate, adjacent to the thermal spa managed by Joan Baptista Blancafort. It was housed in a modest yet carefully equipped building, where a small team of specialised workers collaborated with family members to produce piano rolls with remarkable technical consistency. The location, though peripheral, benefited from the intellectual and artistic effervescence of La Garriga's bourgeois summer colony, which included prominent musicians, writers and critics.¹ This environment fostered a productive dialogue between mechanical craft and cultural ambition, a dynamic embodied in the company's dual function as both manufacturing site and artistic meeting point.² This productive dialogue also reflected broader discourses in Catalan cultural nationalism during the early twentieth century. The association of technology with progress was a distinctive feature of Catalonia's self-representation, especially within the framework of Noucentisme. Intellectuals such as Eugeni d'Ors promoted the idea of a modern, rational and technologically advanced Catalonia as a counterpoint to what was perceived as Spanish backwardness. The expansion of electricity, transport systems and industrial colonies became emblematic of this vision, as did the valorisation of craftsmanship integrated with new forms of mechanical production. Within this context, Rollos Victoria's activities in La Garriga can be understood not only as a local entrepreneurial initiative but also as part of a wider cultural project in which technological innovation was closely linked to artistic prestige and national identity.

By the early 1910s, Rollos Victoria had already established itself as a leading producer of piano rolls in Spain, with an output that far exceeded that of any domestic competitor.³ In addition to its growing distribution network, which reached France, Italy and various countries in South America, the company also built up a substantial in-house catalogue of classical and popular repertoire.⁴ Initially grounded in a near-artisanal model, production at La Solfa soon transitioned into a more ambitious and mechanised system, combining locally built equipment with machinery imported from the UK, along with stringent quality control procedures —many of which were designed or adapted by Blancafort himself.

¹ Pere Blancafort, *La Garriga, el balneari i jo. Cròniques, personatges, anècdotes* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1976).

² Eva Muns, «La pianola: una altra manera de gaudir la música», *Wagneriana Catalana* 23 (2005).

³ Jordi Roquer, «Els sons del paper perforat: aproximacions multidisciplinàries al fenomen de la pianola» (PhD diss., Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2017), 147.

⁴ Jordi Roquer, «Zarzuelas de papel perforado: Jacinto Guerrero en el mercado de la pianola», in *La Zarzuela Mecánica*, eds. Alberto Honrado Pinilla and Tatiana Árez Santiago (Madrid: Fundación Jacinto e Inocencio Guerrero, 2018), 56-71.

Family involvement was central at every level, with the young Manuel Blancafort —future composer— taking part in the encoding and proofreading of the rolls from an early age.⁵ From the outset, the company focused on the manufacture of standard metronomic rolls —mechanical transcriptions based on printed scores and encoded manually with fixed tempo and basic interpretative indications. This type of roll typically included minimal additional markings for dynamics and pedal use, together with graphic cues for tempo changes or articulation. These indications were intended to be interpreted by the pianolist in real time, using the instrument's manual controls to shape phrasing, accents, and expressive nuance. In the hands of a skilled performer, metronomic rolls could produce performances of remarkable subtlety and intensity.

To contextualise Victoria's production, it is helpful to distinguish between the three main types of music rolls available in the early twentieth century: metronomic rolls, hand-played rolls, and reproducing piano rolls. Hand-played rolls were created by recording a pianist's performance in real time, capturing the sequence and duration of notes. Expressive parameters —dynamics and pedalling— were not captured automatically but added later, either manually or with mechanical aids. Reproducing rolls, by contrast, employed pneumatic or electro-pneumatic technologies to capture not only the notes but also the full range of expressive detail, including tempo fluctuations, accents, and pedalling. These were pioneered by companies such as Welte (Welte-Mignon), Aeolian (Duo-Art), Hupfeld (Animatic), and Ampico, each of which developed its own proprietary format.⁶

In Spain, no company is known to have produced either hand-played or reproducing rolls commercially. Only metronomic rolls were manufactured domestically, with Rollos Victoria standing out as the most prominent producer.⁷ Nevertheless, reproducing pianos did exist in the country, as evidenced by private collections that include imported rolls from leading foreign brands.⁸ Victoria's technological infrastructure was far from rudimentary. Letters and technical notes preserved in the Fons Blancafort at the Biblioteca de Catalunya reveal a well-organised production system, with dedicated machinery for punching, rewinding, labelling and quality control. Victoria never advertised itself as a producer of hand-played rolls, yet archival evidence suggests that the company experimented —perhaps more than is commonly assumed— with technologies associated with live recording. Joan Baptista Blancafort's vision extended beyond manufacturing: he understood that the player piano market was as much about cultural capital as it was about mechanical precision.

3. CORRESPONDENCE FROM ABROAD: THE BLANCAFORT BROTHERS' TRAVEL LETTERS (1923-1926)

The letters written by Manuel and Anton Blancafort to their father, Joan Baptista, during their travels across the United States and Europe constitute an exceptional source for understanding both the technical details and the commercial ambitions of Rollos Victoria during its years of expansion. Preserved under the call number M 4896/3 in the *Fons Blancafort* at BC, these 44 folios include detailed reports of their encounters with key figures and institutions in the international player piano industry. The first of these letters is dated 12 July 1923 and was written from the McAlpin Hotel in New York. In it, Manuel recounts their visit to the Kohler & Campbell factory and describes a failed attempt to visit QRS, the largest roll producer in the United States:

The first visit was to Kohler & Campbell. That Mr. Swartz, whom Guarro often mentioned, welcomed us warmly. [...] We told him we wished to visit some factories, especially QRS. He explained that QRS was the most important in the world and that, in American style, it had bought out its competitors while keeping their brand names, but everything belonged to

⁵ Xose Aviñoa, *Manuel Blancafort* (Barcelona: Proa, 1997), 21.

⁶ For an introductory overview of the various recording technologies employed in reproducing pianos, see: Neal Peres Da Costa, *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9-17.

⁷ Jordi Roquer, Ángel Monasterio and Joaquín Ródenas, «Granados through the Rolls: The Presence of Enrique Granados in the Spanish Pianola Market», *Diagonal* 4 (2019): 44-56.

⁸ In addition to direct imports, commercial agreements between major foreign producers and Spanish publishers allowed for the distribution of selected repertoires. Moreover, both Aeolian and Hupfeld maintained branches or agencies in Spain during the 1910s and 1920s.

a single company. However, this Swartz was rather tactless. [...] The man at the factory asked if we were from Guarro's company, saying that if so, it would be difficult to allow the visit, as Guarro was their only competitor in Spain. Swartz did not deny it, and then access was denied to us.⁹

Kohler & Campbell was one of the giants of the piano industry during the first half of the twentieth century. Founded in 1894, the company came to absorb dozens of other firms, including the Standard Pneumatic Action Company, which alone manufactured as many as 50,000 player pianos per year.¹⁰ These figures offer a vivid sense of the scale of the industry. Even so, Kohler & Campbell never truly became one of the dominant powers in the player piano market, which may explain why the Blancafort brothers showed only relative interest in their factory. According to the letter, Kohler & Campbell could have arranged a contact to visit QRS, which was indeed one of the strategic targets of the journey. The episode also illustrates the international reach of the Guarro brothers,¹¹ who acted as intermediaries between Victoria and Kohler & Campbell during the trip, while also serving as the company's business partners in the Spanish market. Their involvement, however, ultimately led to the Blancaforts being denied access to the QRS factory. One of the most revealing aspects of the letter is the implicit confirmation that a company as large as QRS was well aware of the activity in Catalonia, and considered the Guarro brothers to be «the only competitor in Spain». Anton Blancafort, Manuel's younger brother and Victoria's commercial lead had joined the trip to the US. According to Anton, the visit to QRS was absolutely essential in order to uncover certain secrets in the production chain. But Manuel was not entirely convinced: «I don't think there's much more than what we saw at the Kohler factory. That factory is small; they said they produce 120,000 rolls per year, so it's roughly on par with ours. I doubt it has our importance, since they only have a thousand rolls in their catalogue, and I doubt they really make 100,000 rolls».¹²

The claim that Victoria's production volume could rival that of Kohler & Campbell—quoted here at 120,000 rolls annually—is undoubtedly of great historiographical value. It offers a concrete estimate of the output at La Solfa and allows us, albeit speculatively, to infer a larger business volume than previously imagined. Assuming a more moderate figure of 50,000 rolls per year—less than half the number cited in the letter—Victoria's production between 1910 and 1930 could have exceeded one million rolls.

In addition to the data on production volume, some of the most interesting passages in the correspondence refer to the machinery used for punching rolls:

This factory mainly produces rolls for the Welte-Mignon system with the standard 88-note tracker bar. They claim they don't produce anything else, but that can't be true, since they have a machine for printing lyrics and, besides, I saw other types of rolls lying around—novelty music. We saw their four machines in operation [...] Anton says you know them from a brochure Guarro had. He says you didn't like them at the time, but that if you saw them now, you would find some interesting and applicable features for our own machines. The pneumatic system is extremely compact—it's the same width as the [unreadable], so the rods are parallel and not convergent like ours. As for height, it's only about ten centimetres. The entire system is made of metal, and from the tracker bar run little metal tubes which lead to valves: small capsules about three millimetres deep and the size of a five-cent coin, sealed on one side with a flexible membrane. (BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4896/3).

⁹ Letter from Manuel Blancafort to Joan Baptista Blancafort, New York, 12th July 1923. Biblioteca de Catalunya (BC), Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4896/3. All translations from Catalan and Spanish are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁰ Roquer, «Els sons del paper perforat», 161.

¹¹ The Guarro family was a prominent lineage of piano manufacturers and dealers based in Barcelona. The firm, founded by Mariano Guarro in 1860, operated under several names—including *Guarro & Cía*, *Guarro Hermanos*, and *Agustín Guarro*—and reportedly sold over 14,000 pianos from their showroom at the Angelus Hall on the Rambla de Catalunya. In addition to producing their own instruments, they also served as representatives for international brands such as E. F. Walcker & Cie, and maintained their own concert hall. Documentation of their activity can be found in: accessed 29th April 2024, <https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/societatliceu/societatliceuadm/1938/219633/10395-018@societatliceu.pdf>; <https://museovirtualdelorgano.com/indices/organeros/guarro-hermanos/>; https://www.lieverbееck.eu/pianos_espanoles_1850_ahora.htm.

¹² BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4896/3.

It is worth noting that Blancafort refers to the tracker bar —the component with 88 holes allowing air to enter the pneumatic system— as the *flauta* (flute), and expresses scepticism about the technician's claim that the factory only produces rolls for the Welte-Mignon system. This doubt is well founded, given that Welte was not known for issuing rolls with printed lyrics (for sing-along purposes) or popular novelty repertoire. The presence of a lyric-printing machine leads Blancafort to suspect that Kohler & Campbell was also producing text rolls.

Regarding the technical features of the equipment, the letter reveals Blancafort's amazement at the small dimensions of most machines. The text then turns to one of the main obsessions of the team in La Garriga: discovering how American companies manage to eliminate the paper burr, the tiny ridge or fringe of excess paper left behind after punching. This issue recurs in many letters and, as far as the documentation shows, remains unresolved:

This factory has no machine to deal with it, and the manufacturer of the punching machines also says that it simply isn't done —that if you want a cleaner result, you have to punch fewer sheets at a time. But there's some secret here, because they contradict themselves. The same man who told us that also said that at QRS they punch 48 rolls at once using a triple-keyboard system. If each key punches 16 layers, that must create burr —and yet QRS rolls have none!¹³

The burr caused by punching is a serious problem: it can prevent the roll from moving smoothly over the tracker bar and, in some cases, even tear the paper. It is reasonable to assume that the more layers punched at once, the more likely it is for burr to occur. One of the key questions troubling the team at Victoria was how the major companies managed to punch up to 48 rolls simultaneously without leaving any visible burr. The letter also includes detailed observations regarding the printing of graphic indications on the roll paper, including lyrics, tempo markings and dynamics:

We saw the system for printing lyrics as well, and we know there are more complex machines —Aeolian has those. If ever needed [...] a certain Mr White manufactures machines for that purpose. [...] As for marking, I doubt we'll learn much, since no one outside Aeolian uses dotted lines. If we're lucky enough to visit them, perhaps we'll see something on this point. At the Kohler factory —that is, the one producing Welte rolls, the only one we've visited so far— we saw a machine for gluing labels that is very quick and practical. We'll try to find something similar in a stationery supply shop, as they told us it's a common product.¹⁴

Blancafort notes that Aeolian *appears to have been among the few* companies using dotted lines to indicate dynamics —an approach also adopted at La Garriga, albeit through manual methods. At Kohler, they saw a labelling machine that seemed far more efficient than the one they used in Catalonia. With the exception of this particular feature, however, Blancafort suggests that most of the American procedures were not significantly more advanced than their own. What did stand out was the speed and automation of the Kohler process, especially in the printing of visual elements:

All this is hardly new to us [...] no matter how practical and American it may be, these operations are done more or less the same way everywhere. The real improvement is not having to mark [...] between the extraordinary speed of the punching machine and this elimination of the marking stage, they can have sixteen rolls ready in just twenty or thirty minutes. [...] We find lyrics only on «novelty» rolls, and they're added quickly using stencils with the text punched out. These are placed over the roll and passed through an ink roller. One machine pulls both the roll and the text stencil simultaneously.¹⁵

¹³ BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4896/3.

¹⁴ BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4896/3.

¹⁵ BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4896/3.

Blancafort's assessment confirms that Victoria's system was not significantly less sophisticated than its American counterparts, but it was less efficient in terms of output. What most impressed him was the speed: Kohler's setup could reportedly produce over thirty rolls per hour. This suggests that Victoria's capacity was more limited by the degree of automation than by market demand. The 120,000 annual rolls cited by Blancafort may well represent a technical ceiling rather than a commercial one. Aware of the challenges of achieving such output levels with their existing tools, the Blancaforts seem to have chosen —right from the start— to prioritise quality over quantity.

Following their visit to the United States, one of the areas they identified as key to improving productivity was the type of paper used. They began investigating the kinds of paper employed by the leading American companies: «Aeolian makes a very expensive and very good paper; QRS, not so much». Based on suggestions already issued by Joan Baptista from La Garriga, they decided to purchase reels of several types —«without cutting corners on price: 800 kg of paraffin-coated, 300 kg of top quality (Aeolian), 300 kg of second-class quality (QRS)».¹⁶

As previously described, the quality of a player piano roll depends on a number of factors in which human intervention and mechanical precision are intricately combined. For companies like Victoria, which relied primarily on manual transcription, it could be especially disheartening to see a single weak link in the mechanical production chain compromise the musical quality of the original master rolls. For this reason, when assessing the potential for automating certain procedures, the Blancaforts carefully weighed the risks such changes might pose to the final product. A new comment regarding the paper burr generated by simultaneous punching once again demonstrates the team's commitment to quality:

The secret we still need to uncover is how they manage to make 48 rolls at once, as they do, and still present them without burr. [...] The Kohler company, which punches through sixteen layers, leaves a burr that we would not tolerate. [...] I don't recall ever seeing an American roll in such poor condition, and yet you've examined many rolls and remain convinced that they go through some sort of additional process after punching.¹⁷

From this passage it becomes clear that the Blancaforts suspected they were not being shown all the details of the American production systems. The issue of removing excess paper —a major technical concern for the team in La Garriga— remained unsolved, despite their conviction that American rolls must undergo some kind of complementary treatment. This obsession with seemingly minor details, such as burr elimination or automatic labelling, reveals how specific the objectives of the journey really were. The Blancaforts' ambition was not to overhaul their product entirely, but rather to refine a roll whose quality had already been well established.

The high regard for Victoria's rolls in international markets would be confirmed in various letters written after this first journey. Yet even at this early stage, we find a clear indication: during a conversation with Mr Swartz —an intermediary between the Blancaforts and the major American companies— mentioning the Guarro brothers was enough for QRS to close its doors to them. From that point onward, Blancafort took great care when referring to his business partners. In situations where he feared that his association with the Guarro brothers might prove an obstacle, he instead presented himself as an Argentinian client of *Pianos Fischer*.

The text —almost certainly a near-verbatim transcription of field notes taken by Blancafort during the visit— offers a detailed description of no fewer than seven major stages, allowing us to reconstruct the full production chain used at the Kohler factory. The process is presented below in list form, preserving Blancafort's original phrasing and explanations. It begins at the point where the master rolls have already been prepared and serial duplication is ready to begin:

¹⁶ In the lines preceding the transcribed passage, the weight of the order and the conversion from pounds to kilograms are mentioned. This allows us to confirm that the «K» in the text refers to kilograms. The order thus amounted to a substantial quantity of paper —nearly one and a half tonnes.

¹⁷ BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4896/3.

1. Punching.
2. After leaving the machine, the rolls are laid out on a table and immediately folded into roll format.
3. Once the end of the piece is reached—that is, the beginning of the music—the metronome number and a tempo marking such as *moderato* or *allegro* are printed using a press. The entire marking (e.g. «60 moderato») is applied at once, allowing all sixteen rolls to be marked in a single action.
4. Without touching the perforated roll, the header is cut—not using stickers, but with diagonally cut edges—by means of a system of scissors combined with springs that press and guide them across the paper. The cut is clean and rapid.
5. After the final turns of paper are made, the roll is assembled.
6. The full batch of sixteen rolls is then passed to a female worker who adds the labels and later ties the rolls.
7. Finally, hole correction is carried out using a machine. Alongside the sixteen rolls, one is punched on regular paper to be used as a test copy on the piano. In this test roll, erroneous punch marks are noted. Then, roll by roll, a device equipped with a light and transparent glass is used to check and correct the holes using a small drill.

Blancafort goes on to reiterate that the overall process does not differ greatly from the one used at La Solfa, emphasising once again that the key differences lie in speed and in the automation of specific tasks. It is worth analysing each step in detail, as some of the descriptions offer valuable insights.

First, point 1—punching—does not refer to the creation of master rolls but rather to serial punching, carried out in batches of sixteen layers of paper. In La Garriga, by contrast, this task is performed in blocks of six. Point 2 refers to the gluing of the paper onto the roll core and the attachment of the lateral supports.¹⁸ This allows the roll to be wound up to the starting point, where the initial tempo markings are applied (point 3). We may assume that, at this stage, the sixteen rolls are placed into a system that stamps the tempo indications automatically—a process that does indeed strike Blancafort as new and, crucially, a significant time-saver compared to the methods used in Catalonia.

The same applies to point 4, where the system automatically trims the edges of all sixteen rolls, winds them to the starting point (point 5), and prepares them for final labelling and the addition of the paper tie (point 6). These last two operations are still performed manually, just as they are at La Garriga.

Point 7 is particularly striking: it refers to the correction of imprecise punch marks by machine, and even mentions a separate test roll punched on a different type of paper, which is used to verify errors on a piano. This suggests that, after the sixteen rolls have been punched, a quality control step is performed to correct defective perforations. The detail of testing on an actual piano is especially interesting, as this kind of procedure is usually associated with the editing of the original master roll—not with verification in a serial production context.

Although the letter contains no specific details regarding the punching of master rolls, it does confirm that Kohler used a recording piano to create the original matrices—or «models», as the text calls them. Blancafort refers to this process as a transcription based on an actual piano performance: «The transcriptions [...] are made by reproducing the execution on the keyboard. We saw the recording piano, which is installed in a very luxurious room; from beneath the grand concert piano comes a fabric hose carrying the electrical wires into a small chamber where the set of electromagnets and the paper rollers are located».¹⁹

Blancafort does not appear to consider the system of recording from the piano as a novelty. His brief description of a grand concert piano connected via electric cables to a separate chamber aligns closely with the

¹⁸ Typically, the left flange of the roll is not glued but held in place by pressure, allowing for flexibility and ease of movement. The right flange, however, is glued, so that once the roll has been played, one must grasp the paper with the left hand while turning the right flange with the right hand, ensuring the roll is properly rewound and tightly pressed.

¹⁹ BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4896/3.

procedures described in the few sources that document such techniques. An advertisement published in the *Music Trade Review* on 22 October 1921 illustrates the wide variety of models manufactured by the company —Kohler's business was primarily focused on instrument building— and confirms that Kohler constructed its instruments under Welte licence. This arrangement seems to have extended to roll production as well, especially in light of part of the ad copy, which reads: «The Grand Reproducing Piano (under Welte-Mignon patents and licences) [...] combines all the tonal qualities of a grand piano with the reproduction mechanism licensed by Welte».²⁰

Two and a half years after the journey to the United States, Blancafort embarked on a short tour along the Occitan coast and Italy, visiting several shops and business owners in Nice, Genoa and Rome. In his first stop, in Nice, he visited the city's most important roll retailer, which held a stock of 7,000 rolls from all major brands—including the Madrid-based label Diana. From his conversation with the shop owner, we can infer several difficulties caused by the war, such as currency devaluation and new customs restrictions:

He assured me that everything not made in France was acquired before the war: since then, it's been materially impossible to import due to the depreciation of the franc and the customs duties. From the details he gave me, I see how hard it is to find a suitable price both for French customers and for the factory. The prices we offer, even when presented in good faith, are laughable —everyone, in the friendliest manner, asks if we're dreaming of the moon!²¹

The issue of production costs and the inability to offer a more competitive price proved to be crucial. Victoria's prices were too high for markets such as Italy and France, where a type of low-cost production seemed to prevail—rolls of inferior quality, both in terms of materials and punching precision. This made the Catalan rolls appear as premium products, which in turn made their export more difficult:

They really like the rolls, that's for sure. Some customers prefer the wooden cores used by Édition Musicale Perforée [...]. Accepting a small consignment is always appreciated. One company has promised to place an order of 50 to 100 units, as a trial, but they're very doubtful anything serious can come of it. If we could reduce our production costs, many doors would open for us, because at an equal price, our rolls are very well received.²²

The following day, writing from Genoa, Blancafort confirmed the impressions gathered in Nice. Given the difficulties posed by the French and Italian markets, he considered shifting towards a «minimum export» model, *i.e.*, sending out small batches on demand, with the aim of gradually building loyalty among clients who appreciated the quality of Catalan rolls:

I see that the key [...] is to make deals with reliable agents and establish exclusive agreements with sizeable consignments, so that clients can order in small quantities whatever suits them, and receive it without delay. That's how all foreign firms operate. The general view is that German rolls are too expensive (even more than ours). The French ones are fairly priced, and together with the Italian rolls, they dominate the market. We tend to think that the French industry doesn't matter much, but I'm beginning to realise that EMP [Édition Musicale Perforée] is our main rival in Europe. Aeolian has a contract with EMP in Paris, and EMP manufactures the rolls that carry the Aeolian label. That same EMP makes rolls for Salabert, the publisher of hit novelties, and puts their label on them as if Salabert had made them. So in fact, EMP sums up our competition under three names: Aeolian, Salabert and EMP.²³

²⁰ *Music Trade Review*. Online Library: 1880-1933, 22nd October 1921, accessed 29th April 2024, <http://mbsi.org/archive/music-trade-review>.

²¹ Hotel Gallia, Nice, 14th March 1926. BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4896/3.

²² Hotel Gallia, Nice, 14th March 1926. BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4896/3.

²³ Genoa, 15th March 1926. BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4896/3.

One particularly revealing piece of information is Blancafort's confirmation of the commercial relationship between the American giant Aeolian and the French company Édition Musicale Perforée (EMP), which manufactured the rolls sold by Aeolian in France. As we shall see, EMP held a de facto monopoly over roll production in France. However, the quality of its perforations was poor, a fact even acknowledged by Aeolian's own executives in Paris.

Back in Italy, Blancafort gathered further information regarding paper quality, an issue he consistently monitored, as well as techniques for creating master rolls. Interestingly, there appeared to be a connection between musical culture and musical genre: while the perforations produced by F.I.R.S.T. —the leading Italian roll manufacturer²⁴— were generally considered poor, the Italians defended their operatic transcriptions, arguing that they were «faithful to the original»:

Focusing on the Italian situation, I've confirmed what they say about F.I.R.S.T. rolls not being very well liked. At the three companies I visited, they said the paper was bad, and especially the core —very poor. The perforation was also subpar. As for transcription style, they said the operas were very well done, as they match the original exactly. But someone else told me that we do opera better, and that our rolls sound nicer. Everyone agrees that if we could bring the price down, we would easily win them over. Everyone finds it difficult having to deal with us directly —it's too far. The idea of setting up an agency is universally recommended. [...] F.I.R.S.T. also makes text rolls. There's demand for that too. They sell for 5 lire more. I'm advised to set three different prices instead of a single one —that's what EMP does: they print three letters (A B C) on the roll itself, so the customer knows the price straight from the shelf.²⁵

Blancafort's visits to different businesses were valuable not only for gauging market conditions but also for exploring how aesthetic perceptions shaped customer preferences. The transcription style of a piano roll was one of the most decisive factors in its success, and its reception was conditioned by enduring assumptions that would later become central to the evolution of mechanically reproduced music —chief among them the often-overlooked relationship between creativity and technology. At the same time, Blancafort was becoming increasingly aware of the need to strike a balance between *serious music* —which demanded greater attention during transcription— and the *popular repertoires* of the moment, which were unquestionably the rising value in the player piano market. This is supported by the price premium of 5 lire for text rolls, a sign that the format had also been embraced in Italy. The observation points to a divergence from the dominant Anglo-German markets —traditionally focused on artist rolls— and suggests instead the existence of a Latin submarket (France, Spain and Italy) more closely aligned with the American model, where popular and dance music, including sing-along formats, held a much more prominent role.

Another point of interest is Blancafort's insight into the network of intermediaries, commissions, and exclusivity agreements. He notes that intermediaries typically claimed 10 to 15 % commission, and refers to the firm *Schöne & Bocchesse* as a major player in the import-export business between Italy and France. Schöne, a German, was linked to the Walker organ company, while Bocchesse, an Italian, represented all French rolls in Italy. Together, they controlled a significant portion of the Italian market and operated something of a monopoly. Blancafort entered into contact with them, but their insistence on exclusivity made any agreement impossible, as Victoria was already bound to prior intermediaries in Rome.

A few days later, he visited Invernizzi & Rovetto, a Genoa-based piano manufacturer with a shop in Rome. Unbeknownst to Victoria, the Guarro brothers had given this company exclusive rights to sell Victoria rolls in Genoa for one year. Victoria had continued to send rolls to other clients, unaware of the arrangement, while Invernizzi had already printed labels reading «Exclusive agent of Victoria Rolls». Coming on the heels of the failed negotiations with

²⁴ Italian researchers Carlo Bianchini and, in particular, Pietro Zappalà have conducted extensive research on F.I.R.S.T. rolls as part of a digital preservation project developed at the University of Pavia, Cremona. See: Carlo Bianchini and Pietro Zappalà, *Progetto di valorizzazione della collezione dei rulli per autopiano del Dipartimento di Musicologia e beni culturali dell'Università di Pavia: studi sulla ditta cremonese F.I.R.S.T. e catalogazione standard dei supporti musicali meccanici*, 2013, accessed 29th May 2025, http://www.ammi-italia.com/AMMI/Sisar_files/20131005ArticoloCOLLEZIONE%20RULLI.pdf.

²⁵ Genoa, 15th March 1926. BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4896/3.

Schöne & Bocchesse—an alliance that could have been strategically significant—this unconsulted concession enraged Blancafort, who directed his frustration at his partners in Barcelona. In the days that followed, Blancafort tried once more to contact Schöne & Bocchesse in hopes of reopening the discussion, but to no avail. However, from that final exchange he gained a new contact: a certain Mr Scheible, who was on the verge of merging with another entrepreneur. They discussed the possibility of a collaboration, and Blancafort wrote that he believed Victoria could sell as many as 20,000 rolls in Italy through this new channel. Scheible expressed interest in visiting Spain, and Blancafort used the family spa as a selling point—an approach that had become something of a constant in the family's various business ventures. Scheible advised Blancafort to use a transparent display sign, like those employed by EMP, to be placed in shop windows.²⁶ He also suggested adjusting the pricing model, a move that would eventually lead to the reprinting of the catalogue—a change likely to result in the 1929 edition, the most complete version of the Victoria catalogue, with surviving copies held in both the BC and the Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE).

In June 1926, Manuel Blancafort set off once again—this time to Paris—with the aim of establishing new commercial contacts with figures he regarded as strategically important to the business. One of his main targets was the publisher Francis Salabert (1884–1946), who by then had already built a formidable publishing empire:²⁷ «I've been to EDIFO [...] they said they could introduce me to Salabert [...] they even said they could put me in touch with EMP [Édition Musicale Perforée] and with Pleyela. I've made a lot of enquiries. EMP is nothing more than a paper company that switched over to rolls. They manufacture around 50,000 rolls a year (Pleyela even fewer)».²⁸

This letter provides concise data on production volumes: EMP's annual output of 50,000 rolls is particularly telling, placing the French company's production at roughly half the capacity of the Victoria factory in La Garriga. Even more surprising is the fact that Pleyela—despite its prestige—operated at a significantly lower scale.²⁹ These figures demonstrate Victoria's strength in relation to the French market, which in turn was presumably smaller than its British or American counterparts. The available data suggest a European market led by Britain and probably Germany, with Catalonia perhaps not far behind.

Another of Blancafort's objectives was to meet with *Letouzey et Ané*, another giant of the publishing world. There he discussed potential joint ventures aimed at exporting Victoria rolls to England and Belgium. During the meeting, Mr Letouzey examined a Victoria roll and told Blancafort, quite literally, «I don't believe a roll can be made any better», adding that he thought the paper used by Victoria was even superior to that of his own company. Letouzey showed Blancafort some figures from which the latter deduced that Victoria's sales in France were on the rise. He also explained that he had spoken to Pleyela, Aeolian and Favreau about Victoria, and that all of them held the rolls from La Garriga in very high regard, stating: «In France, Victoria rolls have no rival when it comes to quality». Letouzey went on to say that Aeolian had expressed frustration over the lack of competent roll manufacturers in France: «manufacturing in Paris is done poorly», he explained. This situation made him enthusiastic about the possibility of collaborating with Victoria, and both men agreed that it might be worthwhile to transport a machine from La Garriga to Paris. Letouzey proposed that Victoria cover the costs, while he would act as a representative and take a commission on sales.

²⁶ Rome, 17th March 1926. BC, Fons Blancafort. ref. M 4896/3.

²⁷ At the age of sixteen, Francis Salabert took over his father Edward's business. The elder Salabert had achieved considerable success by acquiring the rights to American military music—especially works by John Philip Sousa—and expanded the company's holdings to include a vast catalogue. Among the Catalan composers published by Salabert, Frederic Mompou stands out; the French publishing house released a substantial portion of his works.

²⁸ Paris, 16th June 1926. BC, Fons Blancafort. ref. M 4896/3.

²⁹ There is no known evidence of a dedicated Pleyela factory for roll production. While it is clear that the company created original master rolls—both manually transcribed and recorded from the piano—multiple sources suggesting the existence of only one roll-producing factory in France indicate that Pleyela may have outsourced its serial production to EMP. This would align with what appears to have been a common practice in many countries. In Spain, for instance, there were only three production facilities serving more than a dozen different labels.

Undoubtedly, the Blancafort brothers' business travel correspondence stands as a unique set of documents for understanding the international player piano industry from the perspective of Catalan entrepreneurs. Their observations allow us to compare production models, contrast statistics—some of them quite surprising—and confirm the excellent reputation of Victoria rolls abroad. Not only in Europe but also in the United States, where major companies such as Aeolian and QRS were aware of Victoria's presence and saw the firm as a serious competitor in the Spanish market.

These letters also help define a crucial timeframe—1923 to 1927—which appears to mark the company's international expansion, just before the sudden decline of the player piano phenomenon, both in Catalonia and across the globe. Finally, the technical descriptions of production processes offer grounds for several key hypotheses. First, they confirm that La Solfa was equipped with technology which, although less advanced than that of the American giants, did not preclude the production of high-quality rolls—a fact recognised internationally. Second, they demonstrate that automation was the real differentiating factor between the Catalan company and the multinational corporations, reinforcing the strategic choice to prioritise quality over quantity. And lastly, the fact that Victoria apparently worked only with manually transcribed material—never releasing piano-recorded rolls—remains puzzling, especially given that, as seen in earlier fragments, the technique of recording from the piano was familiar to the team at La Garriga and did not seem to surprise them.

4. RECORDING TECHNOLOGIES AT LA SOLFA: EVIDENCE AND UNRESOLVED QUESTIONS

At the beginning of the correspondence sent from the United States by the Blancafort brothers to their father, we find a remark that deserves to be recovered—not only because of its historical relevance, but also because of the surprise it evokes upon first reading. While describing their impressions of the American industry during a visit to Steinway, Manuel Blancafort refers almost casually to a machine designed to record a pianist's performance directly onto a roll. His comment, however, goes further: «We also found out that Steinway had built a machine for musicians to record what they improvise at the piano. It turned out to be the invention of a private individual [...] a German doctor [...] who showed us the machine. It is no more than what we did with Cabanach some years ago».³⁰

This brief statement invites a radical reconsideration of what we think we know about roll technology in Spain. It not only shows that Blancafort was familiar with the concept of automatic recording, but also implies that some version of this system had already been developed or at least tested in La Garriga, in collaboration with a technician referred to as Cabanach. The tone is not speculative or aspirational; it is comparative and assured. The remark raises a crucial question: if Rollos Victoria had access to such technology, why was it never used as a commercial argument—let alone as a regular method of production?

Further investigation into the figure of Cabanach provides new insights into this question. Thanks to personal interviews conducted in La Garriga it was confirmed that Joan Cabanach was the local watchmaker at the time of La Solfa's operation and, according to oral testimony, closely involved in the development of recording systems at the factory. These accounts were corroborated by Enric Basset, son of Joan Basset, the factory's trusted mechanical engineer. Enric Basset recalls that his father and Cabanach worked together to construct a machine that could capture the notes played on a piano in «real time» using a «wooden board fitted with mercury contacts that ran the length of the keyboard and was placed beneath the keys».³¹ According to Basset, the system was refined over time and successfully tested at the factory. He also

³⁰ New York, 12th July 1923. BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4896/3.

³¹ The system reportedly used at La Solfa, based on mercury contacts, closely resembles descriptions found in the systems employed by multinational companies in the sector—such as the one documented in Ampico US Patent 1,367,634. When a key was pressed, the contact completed an electric circuit that triggered a graphite stylus to mark a continuous roll of paper moving at a constant speed. These drawn lines were then manually perforated to create the final roll, with basic dynamic and expressive markings added during the editing phase. It is unlikely that the system allowed for automatic recording of dynamics, as achieved by larger companies such as Welte, Duo-Art, Ampico or Hupfeld. In those systems, expressive detail was captured through complex mechanisms, including the measurement of the time elapsed between the start of a hammer's motion and its impact on the string—shorter durations corresponding to greater intensity. In contrast, the system employed at Victoria was most likely intended for recording notes, sustain pedal and tempi from a live performance, while dynamics and accentuation were added manually during post-production.

described the use of specialised punches —conical and oval in shape— to avoid leaving paper burrs, a detail that aligns with the persistent concern for mechanical precision reflected in Blancafort's correspondence from the United States.

The technical specificity of Basset's account, along with his confidence that «those composers surely did record something», strengthens the case for a reassessment of Victoria's technological capabilities. It also casts new light on why Blancafort seemed relatively unsurprised by the systems he encountered at Kohler & Campbell —some of which were also used by the big reproducing rolls companies. These new testimonies suggest that experiments with direct recording were already underway in La Garriga before the 1923 trip, and that the technical team at La Solfa, led by Basset and Cabanach, was responsible for their design and implementation.

A close reading of Victoria's catalogues reveals an undeniable fact: unlike many of its international competitors, the Catalan company never used piano-based perforation as a commercial selling point. And yet, there are multiple reasons to suspect that such technology was in fact available at the factory. It is difficult to imagine that an enterprise as ambitious as Victoria —one that introduced pioneering technologies to the Iberian Peninsula and achieved considerable success in international export— would not have adopted direct recording from the piano. As noted earlier, the letters sent from New York in 1923 do not offer concrete technical details about automatic recording.

In his book *De la Garriga i la seva gent*, Martí Sunyol explicitly states that a system for «direct transcription» was implemented at La Solfa.³² While the book does not provide technical documentation, Sunyol's account —rooted in local memory and personal testimony— offers a clear assertion that supports the hypothesis. The evidence presented below will serve to reinforce this view. The Blancafort family's close ties with numerous artists of the time meant that many of them were frequent visitors to the factory. If such a recording system did indeed exist, it is entirely plausible that one or more of these pianists might have recorded original master rolls directly at the piano. Evidence of the many cultural figures who passed through La Solfa can be found in a list drawn up in the late 1980s by Manuel Blancafort himself, intended as a working document for his memoirs. Preserved at the BC, this manuscript —entitled *Música i músics a la Garriga*— contains what appears to be definitive proof that rolls were indeed recorded directly from the piano. A transcription of the document is presented below, followed by Blancafort's final remarks, which offer additional context to the list of names (Figure 1).

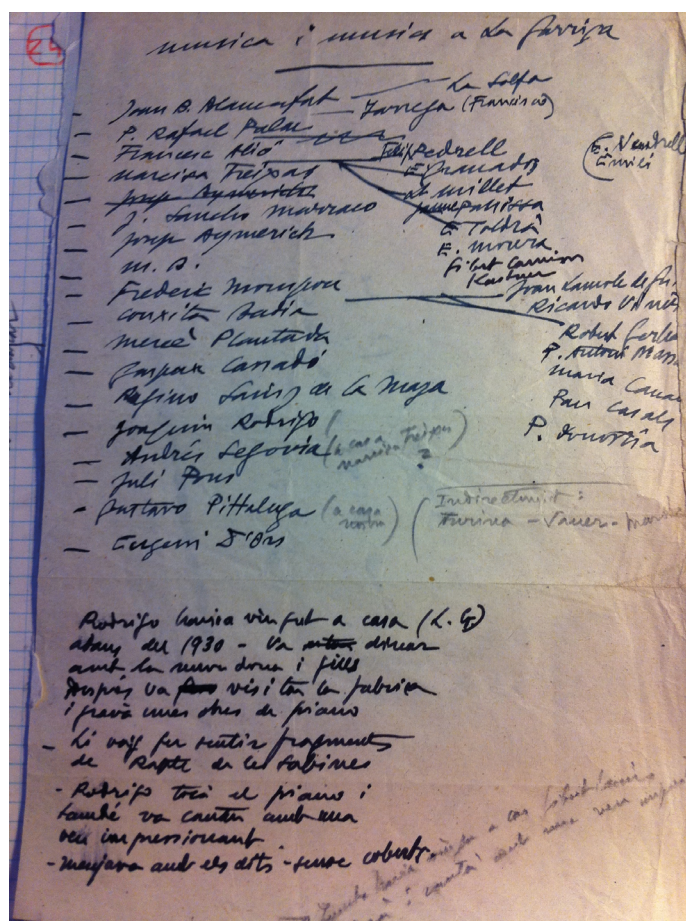


Figure 1. Document *Música i músics a La Garriga*, with final comments providing additional context on the list of individuals.³³

³² Martí Sunyol, *De la Garriga i la seva gent* (Barcelona: Editorial ER, 1983), 19.

³³ BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 4897/5/10.

What follows is a transcription of the original document (in Catalan), accompanied by an English translation enclosed in square brackets:

Joan B. Blancafort

Tarrega (Francisco)

P. Rafael Palau

Francesc Alió

Felip Pedrell

E. Granados

L. Millet

Jaume Pahissa

E. Toldrà

E. Morera

Gibert Camins

Kastner

Narcisa Freixas

Josep Aymerich [Crossed out]

J. Sancho Marraco

Josep Aymerich

M.B. [Manuel Blancafort]

Frederic Mompou

Joan Lamote de Gri[gnon]

Ricardo Viñes

Robert Gerh[ard]

P. Antoni Mass[ana]

Maria Cana[ls]

Pau Casals

P. Arustia

Conxita Badia

Merçè Plantada

Gaspar Cassadó

Rufino Luís de la Maza

Joaquín Rodrigo

Andrés Segovia (a casa Narcisa Freixas) – [at Narcisa Freixas's house]

Juli Pons

Gustavo Pittaluga (a casa nostra) [at home]

Eugeni d'Ors

(indirectament [indirectly]:

Turina-Vauer- Mar... [Not decrypted]

Rodrigo havia vingut a casa (L.G.)
[Rodrigo had come to the house (La Garriga)]
abans del 1930 – Va dinar amb la meua dona i fills
[Before 1930 – He had lunch with my wife and children]
Després va visitar la fàbrica i gravà unes obres de piano
[Afterward, he visited the factory and recorded some piano works]
– Li vaig fer sentir fragments del Rapte de les Sàbines
[I made him listen to fragments of *El Rapte de les Sàbines*]
– Rodrigo tocà el piano i també va cantar amb una veu impressionant
[Rodrigo played the piano and also sang with an impressive voice]
– Menjava amb els dits –sense coberts
[He ate with his fingers – without utensils]

As a simple list, the document already holds considerable interest, as it confirms the large number of prominent cultural figures who passed through La Solfa. In relation to automatic perforation, however, the entry concerning Joaquín Rodrigo, where we read «*Later he visited the factory and recorded some piano works*», is particularly striking. It offers conclusive evidence of the existence of a system capable of recording rolls directly from the piano. Blancafort notes that Rodrigo's visit took place prior to 1930, but in one of the composer's most recent biography, by Carlos Laredo Verdejo, states that the visit occurred in the summer of 1930. According to Laredo Verdejo, Rodrigo travelled to Barcelona on 11 June for the premiere of *Cinco piezas infantiles* and remained there for a few days to visit both Frank Marshall and Manuel Blancafort. In that same month, Rodrigo wrote a letter to his future wife, Victoria Kahmi, in which we read:

On Monday we went out to the countryside, and I was invited to visit a pianola roll factory, where I recorded three rolls: the Zarabanda you like so much, the Berceuse de printemps, and 'a kind of ballet air based on the name of a very lovely girl.' You know what, Victoria? It's a very curious electric piano that records onto paper what you play, with all the nuances.³⁴

Thanks to this letter, we know that Rodrigo recorded three pieces: *Zarabanda* (very likely *Zarabanda Lejana*), *Berceuse de printemps*, and a third work titled «*a kind of ballet air...*» which does not appear in the composer's complete catalogue. We may therefore infer that it was either a work in progress or possibly an improvisation.

The value of these documents is immense, especially considering the significance of locating three previously unknown recordings by Rodrigo, performed by the composer himself. These original rolls have not been located in the personal archives of either the Blancafort or Rodrigo families, and their recovery would unquestionably constitute a major musicological discovery.

Shortly after returning to Valencia, Rodrigo wrote again to Blancafort, referring to the recording session. The following letter, preserved at the BC, contains his reflections on the experience:³⁵

Valencia, 12 August 1930
Mr Manuel Blancafort
My dear friend,
Please forgive me for not having sent you the copies of the pieces we recorded on that famous electric piano on that terrible day. Although I requested them from Max Exig [Eschig], he has not yet sent them —probably because the pressing has not yet been made, and no doubt he is unwilling to send proof copies.

³⁴ Carlos Laredo Verdejo, *Joaquín Rodrigo: biografía* (Valencia: Sin Errata Editores, 2013). The use of the term *nuances* in this context likely alludes to the additional perforations applied to hand-played rolls to emphasise specific notes and to enable automatic pedalling, as discussed above.

³⁵ BC, Fons Blancafort, ref. M 48975/19.

I have read the two beautiful articles you wrote about Mr Samper, and I liked them very much —you are quite the writer. A few days ago I was visited by a gentleman who introduced himself as your representative, from your factory, and he asked whether I would be interested in having some of my works perforated, among other things. I told him that I would be passing through Barcelona next autumn and that I would speak to you then.

Are you working a lot? What are you working on? What do you know about Mompou? One of these days I intend to write to ask how your magical wave-capturing antennas are working.

And that's all for now, dear friend. Give my regards to our friends and receive the affection of your admiring friend,

Joaquín Rodrigo

Sorní, 10

Valencia

The letter introduces the figure of Max Eschig, a Czech-born publisher based in Paris who worked with many of the most prominent composers of his time. As can quickly be verified by checking the date of his death, Rodrigo is not referring to Eschig himself, who had already passed away. We may therefore deduce that when the composer writes «*las he pedido a Max Exig*» [I requested them from Max Eschig], he is referring not to the man but to his publishing house. In the 1920s, Eschig partnered with the guitarist Emili Pujol to publish the *Bibliothèque de musique ancienne et moderne pour guitare*. When Rodrigo travelled to Paris, Ricard Viñes introduced him to Ravel, Debussy, Mompou, and Falla —all of whom were published by Eschig. On learning that Rodrigo had no publisher, Manuel de Falla helped him establish contact with the firm. Years later, Rodrigo's wife, Victoria Kahmi, recounted the importance of this relationship with Eschig's publishing house: «*The director of the Max Eschig company, Jean Marietti, generously offered us an advance of ten thousand francs, with the remainder to be paid upon delivery of the score. This was sheer luxury for us, as it meant we could now enjoy the occasional good steak, and breakfast on real coffee with a freshly baked croissant!*».³⁶

Rodrigo's collaboration with Blancafort at Rollos Victoria illustrates the permeability between artistic creation and industrial music production in 1920s Catalonia. This intersection of composition and mechanical reproduction was exceptional in the Spanish context and highlights the prestige associated with the company's activities. Recent scholarship has revisited Rodrigo's early career and his connections with Blancafort. In particular, Walter Aaron Clark and Javier Suárez-Pajares emphasise this collaboration in their recent biography of Rodrigo, situating it within the broader trajectory of the composer's formative years.³⁷

Returning to Martí Sunyol's account, the author states that this method of direct transcription was also employed at La Solfa, although he does not clarify what exactly is meant by «transcription» in this context. His narrative places the adoption of such innovations after the Blancafort brothers' trip to the United States, yet the letters presented earlier reveal little surprise at the concept of automatic recording —suggesting that some form of experimentation may have already been underway. While the book offers no specific technical details regarding automatic perforation, it does provide a crucial clue: «These trials were carried out by some of the most renowned pianists of the time; thus we know that the great Ricard Viñes – the man who did so much to promote French impressionist music, of which he was an exceptional interpreter – and Juli Pons, another great pianist, came to the factory».³⁸

The fact that Victoria enlisted Ricard Viñes and Juli Pons —both of whom appear in the earlier list compiled by Manuel Blancafort— suggests that their presence at the factory was intended to offer more than symbolic support. It is likely that Blancafort sought not a technical assessment, but an informed artistic opinion from

³⁶ Ladero Verdejo, *Joaquín Rodrigo*.

³⁷ Walter Aaron Clark and Javier Suárez-Pajares, *A Light in the Darkness: The Music and Life of Joaquín Rodrigo* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024).

³⁸ Sunyol, *De la Garriga i la seva gent*, 19.

musicians deeply familiar with the latest performance and recording technologies. Viñes, in particular, fits this profile perfectly given his extensive experience on the Parisian scene and his role in championing new music and innovative formats. The significance of the written testimonies —whether by Blancafort himself or by Sunyol— lies not only in their historical value, but in the fact that they attribute concrete names to what might otherwise remain speculative recordings. Neither Pons nor Viñes appear in any version of the Victoria catalogues, nor have their names been located in family archives or in the holdings of the Blancafort Foundation. Yet their involvement is further supported by a rare example —absent from all known Victoria catalogues— acquired via eBay, which credits Juli Pons as the pianist responsible for the performance of a passage from Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata. This roll is not listed in any of the surviving versions of the Victoria catalogue, which raises the possibility that it may be a rare edition produced for private distribution, perhaps through contacts close to the Blancafort family or to Juli Pons.



Figure 2. Spine of the Victoria roll acquired via eBay, identifying Juli Pons as the performer. The roll bears reference number 20290, which does not appear in any known Victoria catalogue.

The most striking aspect of this discovery is that the piece in question does appear in the Victoria catalogue —but not as a recording. It is listed as a manual transcription under the reference number 2029, identical to the number found on the roll acquired via eBay, but without the final zero. In the catalogue version, no performer is mentioned, implying that it is a metronomic roll and not an artist recording. This discrepancy strongly suggests that Victoria may have produced special editions of hand-played rolls which were ultimately not included in their official catalogues. It remains unclear whether these rolls were ever made available for sale or whether they were test pressings or private commissions. The metronomic version of this roll, as listed in the catalogue, is preserved at the Biblioteca Nacional de España (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The spine of the metronomic (transcribed) roll of Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata held at the BNE, where the different reference number and the absence of Juli Pons as performer are clearly visible.

The comparative analysis of the two digitised rolls confirms that they feature distinct types of perforation —the first originating from a live piano performance, and the second corresponding to a metronomic format. With regard to Ricard Viñes, no further documentary evidence has been found to confirm his involvement, apart from the reference in Sunyol's book and his inclusion in the previously discussed handwritten list. However, several personal anecdotes suggest his close familiarity with roll recording from the piano —enough, it seems, to have allowed him to offer meaningful artistic guidance to Blancafort. According to Alexis Roland-Manuel (1891-1966), a friend and biographer of Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy once told Viñes that while working on *D'un Cahier d'Esquisses*, they had been aiming to write music that would flow so naturally as to seem improvised.³⁹ Viñes found the idea compelling and brought it up for discussion at a meeting of *Les Apaches*, the group of artists and musicians that included, among others, Ravel, Falla, and Stravinsky. Following that meeting, Ravel began work on *Oiseaux tristes*, which he dedicated to Viñes as part of his five-piece suite *Miroirs*. On 30 June 1922, Ravel recorded *Oiseaux tristes* and four other works at the Aeolian studios in London.⁴⁰ Given the closeness between Ravel and Viñes, the respect the composer held for the Catalan pianist, and the fact that the recorded piece was dedicated to him, it is reasonable to assume that Viñes had a thorough understanding of the expressive possibilities of reproducing pianos. Furthermore, by the late 1920s, when Aeolian launched its so-called «Audiographic World Library» Ricard Viñes was among the experts appointed to serve on one of its international advisory committees.⁴¹

5. FINAL REMARKS

This article has sought to reassess the historical, technical and commercial relevance of Rollos Victoria within the broader landscape of the international player piano industry. Drawing on unpublished archival materials, private collections and oral testimony, it has been possible to reconstruct a highly original case that challenges some of the prevailing assumptions about roll production in Spain during the 1920s.

Three major contributions may be highlighted. First, the international expansion of Rollos Victoria between 1923 and 1927 —particularly its contacts with Kohler & Campbell, QRS and Édition Musicale Perforée— reveals a strategic ambition often underestimated in Catalan music historiography. The extensive correspondence preserved at the Biblioteca de Catalunya sheds light not only on commercial negotiations but also on the technical curiosity and manufacturing ingenuity of the Blancafort brothers.

Second, the study of these letters and complementary materials provides new insights into the local adaptation of industrial roll-making techniques. The factory at La Garriga, known as *La Solfa*, developed highly efficient mechanical systems and performed extensive tests with imported machinery, seeking to combine artisanal precision with limited forms of automation. One of the most significant technical obsessions documented in the sources —the issue of paper residue generated during mass perforation— points to a factory that was acutely aware of the limitations and possibilities of its own production environment.

Finally, this study proposes a major revision to the commonly held belief that direct recording from the piano was absent in Spain. Combining documentary evidence, oral testimony and rare surviving rolls, it has been possible to demonstrate that a recording system based on electrical contacts was developed in La Garriga with the involvement of local craftsmen such as the watchmaker Cabanach and the engineer Joan Basset. The documentation analysed also reveals the presence of major pianists such as Joaquín Rodrigo, Ricard Viñes and Juli Pons, all

³⁹ Mike Springer, «Hear Ravel Play Ravel in 1922», *Open Culture*, 17th February 2013, https://www.openculture.com/2013/01/ravel_plays_ravel_the_haunting_melancholy_oiseaux_tristes_1922.html.

⁴⁰ Springer, «Hear Ravel Play Ravel in 1922».

⁴¹ The «Audiographic World Library» was an ambitious international project launched by the Aeolian Company in the late 1920s. Its goal was to create a global catalogue of artist-recorded piano rolls that would serve both educational and cultural purposes. Roquer, «Els sons del paper perforat», 132.

of whom may have contributed to a still-undocumented catalogue of original performances. That these recordings were not advertised or widely commercialised remains an unresolved issue, one which opens new avenues for future research.

Taken together, the findings presented in this article invite a substantial reassessment of Rollos Victoria's role in the international player piano industry. Far from being a marginal or derivative venture, the company emerges as a site of genuine innovation, technical refinement and artistic ambition. Its extensive correspondence with leading firms, its experiments with recording technologies, and the testimonies of major performers point to a factory that was not merely replicating foreign models, but actively contributing to a transnational network of mechanical music production. The evidence of direct piano recordings —long thought absent from Spain— along with the discovery of previously undocumented rolls, compels us to revise established narratives and to recognise La Garriga not only as a hub of regional excellence, but as a locus of global relevance. Future research may yet uncover more traces of this forgotten chapter, but the materials gathered here already challenge the traditional centre-periphery divide and position Rollos Victoria as a singular case of peripheral modernity at the intersection of music, technology and cultural exchange.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST:

The author of this article declares that they have no financial, professional or personal conflicts of interest that could have inappropriately influenced this work.

CREDIT AUTHORSHIP:

Conceptualization, data curation, investigation, methodology, visualization, writing - review & editing.

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