



# Chambers of Melody

**T**HE MAJESTIC DOUBLE HOUSE ON WIS-casset's High Street — white with black shutters, flanked by towering horse chestnut trees — has a mysterious, mythological look. You know there is something unusual going on inside even before you see the sign: "Musical Wonder House."

But the sign can't begin to explain what's within: a priceless collection of antique music boxes — some that would fit in your hand, others the size of massive cabinets.

For Danilo Konvalinka — maestro and majordomo of the "Musical Wonder House" — music boxes are not the tacky little jobs that turn out tinny versions of "Mary Had



Konvalinka at a 1912 player grand piano.



Left: *Extremely rare American Regina Drum Table Musical Box, ca. 1898.*

Right, top: *A Reginaphone Music Box, 1902.*

Right, middle: *Giant Full Orchestral Musical Box, made in Geneva. The six cylinders play a total of 72 airs, and the table also serves as a writing desk.*

Right, below: *Grand Formal Musical Box in inlaid rosewood case, ca. 1845.*

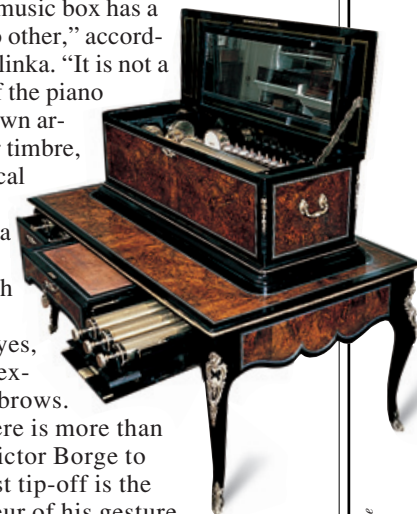


a Little Lamb," but imposing, handmade apparatuses that produce sonorous renditions of major symphonic works.

The collection features early-19th-century cylinder music boxes, late-19th-century disk music boxes (with changeable, affordable metal disks a lot like 20th-century records), rare player-piano rolls, and even a Steinway Pianola piano, which Konvalinka uses to re-create the performances of famous pianists.

These are musical instruments, he declares. "The music box has a sound like no other," according to Konvalinka. "It is not a replication of the piano — it has its own arrangement or timbre, its own musical quality."

Konvalinka is a formidable gent with reddish gray hair, green eyes, and peaked, expressive eyebrows. But wait; there is more than a touch of Victor Borge to him. The first tip-off is the mock grandeur of his gesture when he offers touring guests hard candy from an ornate porcelain dish. But of course the dish is a music box that begins to play upon contact.



"This is a very empty room — I have nothing," Konvalinka says sadly as he begins his tour, ushering a group into the first of many startling interiors — room upon room of brocade, velvet, chandeliers, tapestries,

and period furniture dominated by the splendid boxes and cabinets that hold chambers of melody.

As compelling as these artworks are, their appeal owes a good deal to the maestro's presentation. Though low-key and professorial, he is smitten with music-box sound. An hour with these magnificent instruments is an hour with Danilo Konvalinka, who has been enchanted by a certain kind of musical sound since boyhood.

"It all began in Austria, where I sold my daddy's work — artistic brass work," says Konvalinka, who was a child during World War II. "There was a U.S. Army officer, Captain Jack Turner, who asked if my dad could repair an old music box that had been in his family. He shipped it from California to Salzburg. In this way the bug was injected."

He emigrated to the U.S. in 1956, selling new music boxes — but collecting old ones — in Georgetown, a fashionable part of Washington, D.C. During the early 1960s, he and his former wife visited Wiscasset, where he sought and found a place to show his collection.

The maestro is not given to small talk, though he does love to share, even if an enthusiast's appreciation is accompanied by naiveté. When a visitor remarks on the artistry of glowing wooden boxes, many with ornate inlays, Konvalinka remarks, "It is what is inside the box that counts." He then brings forth an unremarkable black box from which comes the most exquisite Mozart. The small audience of visitors is enrapt. Konvalinka stands over his music boxes, gazing into them, conducting.



— LYNDA MORGENROTH

◀ **ESSENTIALS:** *Musical Wonder House, 18 High St., Wiscasset, ME 04578; 207-882-7163.*