

SHATTERED

BY LESSER OF 2 WEEVILS - 2022

Episode 2

[Frenetic theme music.]

NEMO: Hi there, again, it's me. I'm a bit more chipper as not only have I found a lead on, perhaps, the cylinders, but I've found someone who's almost as interested in this whole mystery as I am.

PHIL: Well, everyone loves a mystery.

NEMO: Okay, everyone, let me introduce you to Phil, who is joining me on Skype from England. Maybe you'd better say something . . .

PHIL: Yes, okay. Hello there, old recording enthusiasts and French culture lovers and opera lovers and who exactly is this podcast for . . .?

NEMO: At this point, it's mainly for me. I haven't heard from anyone who is actually listening to it . . .

PHIL: Okay, then, let me start again. Hello there, I'm Dr Phil Donan, I have an MA in Victorian literature and a PhD in nineteenth century French history. So this is all really up my street.

NEMO: And you work for the University of Glenullen, is that right?

PHIL: I did until very recently, right enough, and now I'm a freelance researcher, which is how I've got time to time to dabble in playing detective.

NEMO: I found Phil through my search for a Pianola.

NEMO: *Voilà, Alicja et Hakim. Disez "àllo," les deux.* [Okay, Alicja and Hakim. Say "hello," you two.]

HAKIM: *Àllo! Tu fais quoi ça?* [Hello! What are you doing with that?]

NEMO: *Je cherche . . .* [I'm looking . . .]

HAKIM: *Ah, okay. J'n'savais pas . . .* [I didn't know . . .]

NEMO: *En anglais, s'il te plaît . . .* [In English, please . . .]

ALICJA: *Montre moi. . .* [Show it to me . . .] Mmmhmm, yes, that's definitely a piano roll.

NEMO: *C'est un peu étrange, n'est-ce pas . . .* [It's a little strange, isn't it . . .] to find a piano roll with Gramophone recordings . . .?

ALICJA: I . . . suppose. It really depends on what's on the roll. Is it not on the catalogue?

NEMO: No, it's not.

ALICJA: Oh, well. You had better find a Pianola to play it on.

NEMO: How do I do that?

PHIL: Do you, I mean, do you, do you often record your colleagues at work?

NEMO: Alicja doesn't mind. And Hakim's sort of a show off . . .

PHIL: Are you sure they know they're going to be on this podcast . . .?

NEMO: And once Phil and I had been introduced, we were able to find someone with a player piano in Paris, who I lent the piano roll to and he made a lovely recording for us.

PHIL: Lovely isn't really the right word, is it? I mean, really?

NEMO: I guess you're right.

PHIL: But, and I don't want anyone to have the impression that I was really responsible for finding the Pianola. That was Monsieur Xavier, I wouldn't want anyone to think . . .

NEMO: Oh, yes of course. But you were the one who identified the seal.

PHIL: Well, yes.

NEMO: Let me give you all a little bit of history—not much, I promise.

PHIL: What's wrong with a little bit of history?

NEMO: Gramophone recordings of the kind in the urn—the official ones—were similar to Red Seal recordings released by Victor, they were prestige recordings, they were highbrow music like opera. And the piano roll, in its casing, was sealed in red wax, in a similar way. However, underneath the seal was a slip of paper. Phil figured out what that was—

PHIL: It's a chit, like a receipt, saying that the person who signed it is an *abonné*, and not only that, but one who's got a box three times a week—

NEMO: Hang on, Phil, what is that, what's an *abonné*?

PHIL: It's like an opera patron. Someone who subscribes—like a season ticket holder.

NEMO: And it was signed . . . ?

PHIL: De Chagny. I think it would be unlikely, given the time period, to be anyone other than Philippe, Count de Chagny. A French aristocrat and a known opera lover.

NEMO: So, we don't want to jump to any conclusions—

PHIL: Well, this scrap of paper could be just that, a scrap of paper.

NEMO: But equally, it's just possible that it could belong to the inventor on the Volta cylinders. Because Phil was aware of a phonograph recording—

PHIL: I had been dimly aware there was a phonograph recording of Count Philippe—

NEMO: It's in a cylinder archive based in California, it's an Edison phonograph recording from 1879 or so.

PHIL: But I'd never actually heard it myself.

NEMO: And Count Philippe could be our man, because he was wealthy and a patron of the arts— His younger brother married an opera singer, didn't he?

PHIL: He did. There's that connection.

NEMO: And he mysteriously vanished, didn't he?

PHIL: Yes, that's true, although I don't know if realistically we can say that has anything to do with the piano roll or the Volta cylinders.

NEMO: And the piano roll, we've listened to it a couple times now and agree that it's—

PHIL: Impressive. Bearing in mind that some composers of the early 1900s composed specifically for the piano roll, creating pieces that were too complex for ordinary human players.

NEMO: So we'll just pause a moment to play it for you. And then we're going to have a listen to the Count Philippe phonograph from 1879, the digitized file which the Continuous Wave Foundation in California has kindly lent us. So, have a listen . . .

[Excerpt from piano roll.]

NEMO: Strange and kind of beautiful, isn't it?

PHIL: And possibly Count Philippe's composition. Or connected to him in some way.

NEMO: As you can tell, Phil and I are pretty excited to listen to the Edison phonograph recording and to find out whether Count Philippe's voice is one of the ones heard on the Volta cylinders in the urns in the Palais Garnier time capsules.

PHIL: Should you, you know, play the cleaned up version of that first cylinder . . . ?

NEMO: But they would have already heard it, it's on the website.

PHIL: Well, you can't assume that they would.

NEMO: Okay. You're right.

PHIL: And you said you had to hand crank this . . . to get it to play . . . ?

NEMO: It would have all been hand-cranked, so the speed would have been variable. And you would have listened to it through, like, rubber listening tubes.

PHIL: Tubes?

NEMO: Yeah, you know, kind of like earbuds.

PHIL: Oh, all right. Should we let them hear it now then . . . ?

NEMO: Yeah, of course.

Wax cylinders 1 & 2 (translated into English)

DUDE B: . . . you are wasting my time.

DUDE A: You are a guest in my home, and so I entertain you. You will have to stand much closer to the apparatus. Like this. You must speak very loudly into it. Come, come!

DUDE B: What is the point of this contraption?

DUDE A: You didn't react this way to the telegraph. I thought you had a belief in the workings of progress.

DUDE B: The telegraph came a long time ago. We were younger men.

DUDE A: You really must *speak loudly into the horn!*

DUDE B: And you invented all this, did you?

DUDE A: Naturally.

DUDE B: I read the newspapers. Had not Thomas Edison . . . ?

DUDE A: A trifle. This is a design, an improvement, to my own specifications. You'll believe me when I play it back.

PHIL: So that's our mysterious cylinders for comparison purposes.

NEMO: With the verified Count Philippe phonograph from 1879.

PHIL: All right.

NEMO: So here goes.

[Phonograph recording.]

PHILIPPE COMTE DE CHAGNY: *Je suis Philippe Comte de Chagny. Ceci est mon phonographe. Qui sème le vent, récolte la tempête.* [I am Philippe Count de Chagny. This is my phonograph. As you sow, so shall you reap.]

NEMO: Well—that's pretty clearly not . . .

PHIL: Even by the standards of the tinfoil phonograph, which you said was pretty primitive .

..

NEMO: It's not, it's not . . . Dude A.

[Outdoor recording, in a park.]

NEMO: Unfortunately, that didn't really turn out like we expected it to, and I felt . . . just . . . so embarrassed because I had gotten Phil interested in it, and . . . Well, Phil seems to be a more practical type all-around, and *he* suggested, instead of feeling bad about the dead end, I should leave it alone for awhile and try investigating other leads. And I did think about it, and I wasn't really sure what there was in terms of leads. But as it happens, Monsieur Xavier, the piano roll collector, actually had a bit of a connection with the Palais Garnier.

[Nemo is walking outside in the park with her recorder.]

NEMO: So, Monsieur Xavier, who I'd only spoken to before on the phone, agreed to meet me here in Buttes Chaumont to talk about an intriguing story.

Bon jour.

XAVIER: *Bon jour.*

NEMO: So Monsieur Xavier, before we met up, told me a lot about the history of the player piano. I had no idea the repertoire was so vast or that so many of these things had been manufactured. Millions of them. Tens of thousands of piano roll titles. And it wasn't just serious classical music or opera—the whole range of pieces for piano were reproduced in rolls. You can even buy modern player piano rolls, like, I've heard "Bohemian Rhapsody" played on player piano. Imagine that on player piano. Um, anyway . . . Monsieur Xavier was the first to admit to me that his tastes were a little eccentric and was at a loss to explain what led him to collecting rolls for player pianos. I did get to talk to him about his connection to the Paris Opera.

[In the park.]

NEMO: *Pourrais-je . . . ?* [May I . . . ?]

XAVIER: *Oui, oui, oui, s'il vous-plait, asseiez-vous.* [Yes, yes, yes, please, sit down.]

NEMO: Bernard, Monsieur Xavier, speaks a little English and has agreed to be recorded on the podcast. Yes?

XAVIER: Euhhh . . . yes, yes.

NEMO: So, Monsieur Xavier, you kindly made us that recording from the piano roll on your player piano.

XAVIER: *Ouais.*

NEMO: And I think you were of the same opinion about the music . . . ?

Cette musique, c'était un peu étrange, n'est-ce pas? [That music, it was a bit strange, wasn't it?]

XAVIER: Oh, *ben, oui, c'est clair, hein? Mais quand vous m'avez dit que cette musique est venue du Palais Garnier, je n'étais pas étonné. Pas du tout.* [Oh, yeah, for sure. But when you told me that this music came from the Palais Garnier, I wasn't surprised. Not at all.]

NEMO: And why do you say that? Why weren't you surprised when I told you the piano roll came from the Gramophone collection from the urns at the *bibliothèque-musée*?

XAVIER: *C'était . . .* because . . . my father, he worked there.

NEMO: Your father worked there . . . *Votre père travaillait pour le Palais Garnier? Ah bon?* And what did he do?

XAVIER: He was, how you say, *pompier*? He was a fireman.

NEMO: And he trained in the lowest cellars?

XAVIER: *Oui. Il a toujours dit que cet immeuble était hanté.*

NEMO: Okay, the building was haunted. But why did he think that? Did he see something or . . .?

XAVIER: There were . . . *histoires*, stories. From . . . long time ago.

NEMO: An old building is going to have stories.

XAVIER: *Non, non, Vous vous méprenez.* [You misunderstand me.]

NEMO: *Alors, expliquez le moi.* [Okay, so explain it to me.]

XAVIER: The . . . buried voices.

NEMO: The Gramophone recordings in the urns underneath the Opera. Yes?

XAVIER: Yes. They were buried on the lowest level. Same level as where the firefighters used to train. Long time ago, many generations, *une squelette*.

NEMO: A skeleton.

XAVIER: Was also buried there. My father heard from old builders, they told it to him.

NEMO: A skeleton buried in the same place as the urns. Okay. *Merci beaucoup, Monsieur Xavier.*

XAVIER: *Je vous en prie, Madame.* [You're welcome.]

NEMO: Speaking with Monsieur Xavier made me think about how fragile so many material things around us in the world are. Like, the cylinders themselves: drop them, and they could so easily be shattered and the secrets on them would have died with them. I . . . didn't quite know what to make of Xavier's information. At first, I thought maybe it had to do with Count Philippe de Chagny's mysterious disappearance. That could really be something—this count who may or may not have composed some gorgeous, strange music and might or might not have been dabbling in some kind of experimental sound recording, he had somehow died on the lowest level of the Paris Opera and his corpse was still there? I did backtrack a minute and think that maybe Xavier was pulling my leg—an old story told to firefighters in the 1960s re-told to a child . . . there's a lot of time past and a lot of room for error and rumor there. But then I did some research, and the skeleton has been reported in other sources. Someone called Monsieur Faure, an administrator of the Académie Nationale de la Musique, mentioned it, as did a General Duvacherelle. So it's there in the records, if a bit obscure. You'd think this kind of rumor would have been better known to the general public . . . I'm still not sure what this has to do with the Volta Lab cylinder recordings or the piano roll, or Count Philippe, but it's all kind of interesting and weird . . . aaaaaaand distracts from the day job. Anyway, do you have any thoughts? Listeners . . . out there? If you do, you can e-mail us at therealshatteredpodcast@gmail.com. It would be great to hear from you. It could be that some expert out there knows who made the recordings and who composed the music on the piano roll . . . and maybe where Count Philippe went, for all I know. (pause) That music is kind of . . . hypnotic, don't you think?

[Distorted, glitchy sequence.]

NEMO: Do you think he was murdered?

PHIL: Who? Count Philippe?

NEMO: Or do you think maybe he faked his death?

PHIL: I can't see why—he was a wealthy aristocrat.

NEMO: No evidence of . . . scandal?

[Cell phone ring. Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor*.]

NEMO: Sorry, I forgot to turn off the sound.

PHIL: You seem to get a lot of calls from that number.

NEMO: Yeah.

PHIL: You ever going to answer it?

Or maybe get another ringtone?

[Echoes and glitch.]

End credits:

The *Shattered Podcast* is hosted by Nemo and Dr Phil Donan, with theme music by Katie Seaton, and is a Lesser of 2 Weevils Production 2022.