

## Play It Again, Gaviman! . . . a recording review of outdoor mechanical music

### Karl King March Festival

The Wurlitzer 165 was the most popular of the larger band organs made in America. Twenty-seven different instruments can be identified as being made and sold, excluding the many other styles and makes of instruments that either played or were converted to the 165 scale. The organ on this recording is one of the ten surviving 165s and one that hasn't been seen in public for many years. It has been heard on several previous Carrousel Music cassette and CD offerings playing standard Wurlitzer rolls. The technical details of the 165 can be found in several other sources, so we'll simply note that it plays 256 pipes, 22 bells, a snare drum, a bass drum (with regular and contemporary tympani beaters), regular and crash cymbals, a triangle and two castanets.

It has been generally accepted that Wurlitzer cloned a Gebrueder Bruder 65- or 69-keyless "Elite Orchestra Apollo" instrument to manufacture their 165 style. The first was sold in 1914, a late entry to the field but Wurlitzer's best orchestral band organ. The organ heard here, serial number 2992, was shipped to Rochester, New York, on April 28, 1916, and appears to have been the eighth manufactured. New York rebuilder John George Fuchs once worked on it. It was last known to be playing on a carousel at Miami's Police Benevolent Association Park, under the care of James L. "Pete" Logan. A fire there may have spelled the end of its original playing days. The internals of the instrument ended up in the Heller hoard in Macedonia, Ohio. The restoration was accomplished by the late Mike Kitner, with assistance from owner Bill Black. The task was completed in 1994, but the facade awaits decorative treatment.

The tonal quality of the completed instrument is of a very high order, with individual voices heard clearly and everything in good tune and regulation. The disk shows good balance in the recording technique and faithfully reproduces the sound of a well-tuned and maintained 165 with proper register action. The one missing effect is the lack of swell shutters. Their absence facilitated better control over the recording process but eliminated one means to modulate sound levels.

Beyond being a first-class recording of a finely restored instrument, what makes this disk special is the music selections on it. With the exception of a few tunes, such as Karl L. King's signature *Barnum and Bailey's Favorite*, period arrangers essentially ignored the large body of music that was written to accompany American circus performances. They chose to stay with traditional and contemporary favorites, Tin Pan Alley songs and show tunes. They satisfied the public that heard their organs on carousels, at skating rinks and in dance halls, so what they did in their own time was satisfactory. In recent years both commercial and privately made recordings of circus material arranged for band organ have been made available.

The first examples of the circus music genre can be found in the late 1870s, but the zenith of both creativity and productivity was

understatement. The selections on this recording are King's later works, from 1942 and 1955, when he was leading the Ft. Dodge band. Hopefully, another recording of King's great waltzes, galops, one and two steps and overtures will follow.

The arranger of the rolls on the recording is Bob Stuhmer, a long-time devotee of band organs. His other arrangements for Wurlitzer 125 and 165 scales can be heard on other CDs from Carrousel Music. He revealed that King's tunes were chosen because they were very melodic, with sweet trios, sustained notes and very receptive to frills and other period type embellishments. The conductor's score, along with instrument parts in the keys of E-flat and B-flat that transposed readily into the keys of G or C for the organ, were used in the arranging. The perforating of the rolls was performed one

hole at a time, an arduous task well-known to those that produce their own rolls and books. These Stuhmer arrangements are not yet available in roll form, so the disk serves as a vehicle to judge his talents, which appear to be of a very high order. There is much variation in registration, with frequent and ingenious use of solo voices and appropriate use of the percussion. The music gets your toes tapping without beating your ears or getting monotonous.

This disk contains 58 minutes of music. It was recorded in digital format in year 2000. The disk is housed in the standard jewel case. The insert provides only the tune listing. The disk is available by mail (Carrousel Music, P. O. Box 231, Chambersburg, PA 17201, USA), telephone (717-264-5800, credit card purchases) or website <<http://www.carousels.com/cmusic.htm>>. The cost is \$23.50 plus \$1.00 for shipping and handling. Be certain to specify number SW165-CD2. You can't go and see a circus that plays Karl King's great music today. But you can vicariously experience and envision some of the thrilling and sumptuous action of the three-ring horse operas by sampling this offering from Carrousel Music.

Fred Dahlinger, Jr.



Figure 1. The mid-section of the Wurlitzer 165 military band organ, serial # 2992. Note the myriad of pipes along with the bells below and the twin roll frames in the background.

reached shortly after the turn of the century. Standing tallest among the composers of circus music was Karl L. King (1891-1971), whose creative works have been recognized and appreciated ever since their initial performances. King was a bonafide circus "windjammer," playing baritone on four different shows from 1910 to 1913 and then serving as bandleader of the big-top bands on Sells-Floto Circus 1914-1916 and the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth during 1917 and 1918. Thereafter, he resided in Fort Dodge, Iowa, where he composed, taught, published and led the local municipal band, renamed in his honor, until his eightieth birthday. To say only that he was a gifted composer of the big-top style would be an