

## The 89-keyless Carl Frei Concert Organ A Frei Original

Herb Brabandt

It probably all started many years ago at the local amusement park. I always looked forward to visiting Fountaine Ferry Park in Louisville, KY, where there was a wonderful carousel (three abreast Dentzel now at Great American Amusement Park) and a magical Wurlitzer 153 band organ that played “by itself.” As a child I found it fascinating that a music roll could play such wonderful music.

Much later in life, after school and marriage and children, I became a member of the MBSI and before long purchased a small (49-key) Limonaire fair organ. This “quenched my thirst” for a while until I met Roy Haning and Neal White in Troy, Ohio, who had this wonderful sounding 57-key

Gavioli organ. At the time I didn’t have all of the money required, so Roy agreed to hold the organ until I raised the funds. I have always been grateful to Roy and Neal who were always hospitable to me during many visits to their collection and shops. After acquiring the Gavioli, I was quite satisfied for a while and had no intentions of adding to the collection.

Then I heard about an annual three- or four-day event in England called the Stourpaine Rally where, in addition to many fair and carnival attractions as well as exhibits demonstrating how things were at the turn of the century, one could find many huge steam-powered traction engines and numerous very large fair organs. Most of these large organs belonged to the showmen and carnival operators who gathered on a large farm in Dorset County in south central England and amongst many other activities enjoyed firing up the showmen’s steam engines and playing organs from morning and into the night. The rallies were held in September at the end of their show season and as the years have passed it has developed into the greatest gathering of its type anywhere and is now known as the Great Dorset Steam Fair. After seeing these large organs and hearing some of their

musical capabilities, I was “hooked” and vowed to own such an instrument one day.

Moving ahead a few years, it was sometime in the early 70s that I met Dan Slack. Dan was a regional sales manager for Cessna Aircraft with offices in Louisville, and he would often fly in on business and spend his evenings visiting and talking organs. Dan always wanted to get a group of organ owners together for an “organ rally” and I would take the devil’s advocate view that in this country the organs are more scattered than those in England and few people (if any) would trailer an organ hundreds of miles to play for a weekend “just for the fun of it.” (Little did I know!)

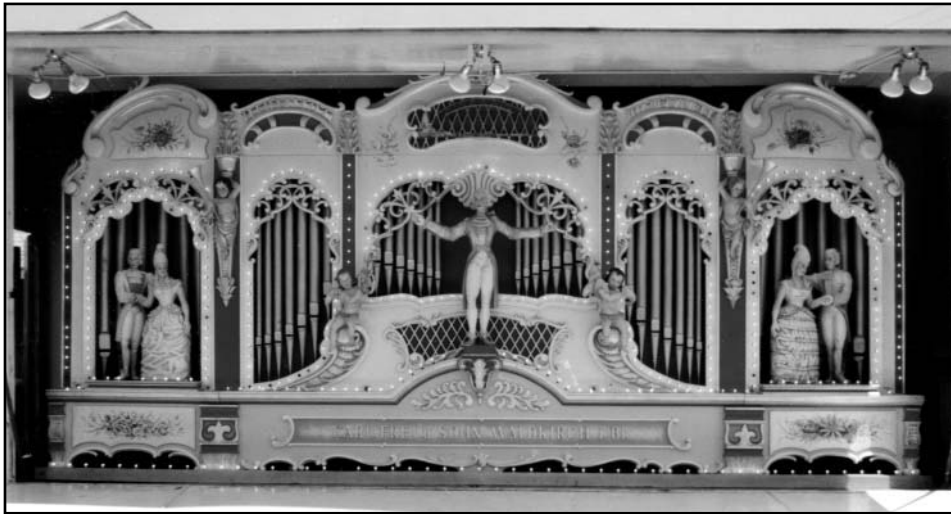


Figure 1. The organ still in the trailer, but safely at “home.”

Sometime in the mid-70s, Dan had acquired an 89-keyless Carl Frei concert organ (Figure 1) and shortly thereafter, with Dan’s family expanding, he purchased a nice piece of property in Fremont, OH, with the intentions of building a house and music building. He then decided to put the Carl Frei organ up for sale and in July 1975, after numerous financial gymnastics



Figure 2. The organ with the facade center removed; Ken Smith on the left and Dan Slack on the right.

Photo: Jack Hewes

on my part to come up with funds, we had a deal. But there was a “hitch” in the agreement: Dan, in his determination to have an organ rally, had made arrangements with Fred Bahlau, owner of the Stagecoach Stop Museum in Irish Hills, Michigan, to host the very first MBSI Mid-Am Organ Rally. It was scheduled for the end of July and I could not take possession until the rally was over, as Dan wanted to “present” the organ (**Figure 7**).

Dan was always good at recruiting help and services whenever needed, and somehow he talked Ken Smith into driving a borrowed ½-ton pick-up truck to pull the organ from Fremont to Irish Hills. The organ trailer was 28 feet long and almost 13 feet high (ground to rooftop) and the total load weighed in at almost five tons. Ken recalls it was quite a trip as the truck was overworked and 45 mph was the top speed possible. It was a one-day rally and the round-trip was made the same day. I was nervous the entire time until the adventure was completed as there was some question regarding the road-worthiness of the trailer.

There was still the problem of transporting the organ to Louisville. The week after the rally I hired a company whose business was moving mobile homes, and I did not breathe easily until the trailer and organ were parked safely in my driveway on August 5, 1976.



Figure 3. The organ lit at night with 500 lights.

Since the organ is so huge (and heavy) I decided I would not be traveling with it, so it became necessary to design and construct a room to accommodate the organ. During the con-



Figure 4. The author posing with Carl Frei, Jr. while obtaining information on the 89-key organ in December, 1980.

struction period, we played the organ numerous times outdoors and attracted neighbors from as far away as ¼ mile. With its 500 lights, the organ makes a rather spectacular sight at night and we were thankful for tolerant and enthusiastic listeners (**Figure 3**). Within several months the organ was moved into its permanent home and the trailer was disposed of, thereby eliminating the temptation of future urges on my part to “travel” with the organ.



Figure 5. Carl Frei, Sr. and Jr. (circled above) oversee the removal of the 89-key organ from the workshop.



Figure 6. A vintage photograph detailing one of Carl Frei, Sr.'s woodcarvers (Wilhelm List) working on a figure for the 89-key organ.



Figure 7. The 89-keyless Carl Frei organ appearing at the Mid-America chapter's first organ rally in 1976. Chapter members pose for this historic photo including the Mid-Am chapter are present—can you name them all?

### History of the Organ

The precise date of manufacture is not certain, but on one of my visits with Carl Frei, Jr., I understood it to have been built in the mid-1950's (Figure 4). He further indicated this organ was the last of only a very few (three or four) of these larger "original" organs (built from the ground up) where Carl Frei, Sr. actually participated in the design, construction and voicing. I was able to obtain a "portfolio" of photos taken in the Frei workshop during construction of the organ. Photos taken as the crated organ was being "extricated" from the workshop show Carl Jr. and "Papa" Frei supervising the operation (Figure 5). Mrs. Frei always referred to Carl Sr. as "Papa." There is also a photo in this group showing Wilhelm List carving one of the dancing couples (Figure 6).

The organ was built to order for John Reid, the owner of *Happyland Shows, Inc.* in Detroit, Michigan, who apparently took delivery in 1956. He sold it to Bob Megerlie who had an

amusement park in Youngstown, Ohio and also traveled the organ with Megerlie Shows.

Dan Slack acquired the organ from Bob Megerlie and then the organ was entrusted to me in July 1976, and moved to Louisville in August, 1976 after appearing at the aforementioned rally.

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...ding the author (second from left—with pipe!), Dan Slack (to the left of the left angel) and a smiling Frank Rider to his right. Other current and past members  
Photo: Ken Smith

### Description of Organ

From a physical perspective, there can be no doubt the facade and figures are in the Black Forest style. The facade is 20 feet wide and is enhanced with nine carved figures. The dancing couples on either side oscillate and the conductor is multi-articulated. There are four cherubs, each assigned to a musical instrument, and a total of 500 lights illuminate the facade.

The extremely large main case measures 112 inches wide by 87 inches high by 46 inches in depth. The organ plays 89-keyless music arranged to the Gavioli “G-4” scale which is basically a “foundation” scale. Larger Gavioli scales, for example 98, are expanded versions with added holes for voice extensions, registers, and instrument additions (chimes, etc.). There are also variations of the 89-key scale, the two most popular being the “VB” or violin-baritone scale more commonly found on organs in Great Britain while the “G-4” scale is more popular on the Continent.

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The cardboard for keyless music is punched with round holes whereas the “key” music holes are rectangular. To accomplish playing a sustained note with key music, a long slot is used whereas for keyless music this is accomplished with a closely spaced series of round holes.

The scale breaks down as follows: 22 melody, 20 counter-melody or baritone, 17 piccolo, and 16 bass notes of which eight are for trombones playing only when called for. There are nine notes assigned for drums, conductor and registration. If we total these, we come up with more than 89! This is because the lowest five piccolo notes (pipes) are mounted with the clarinet

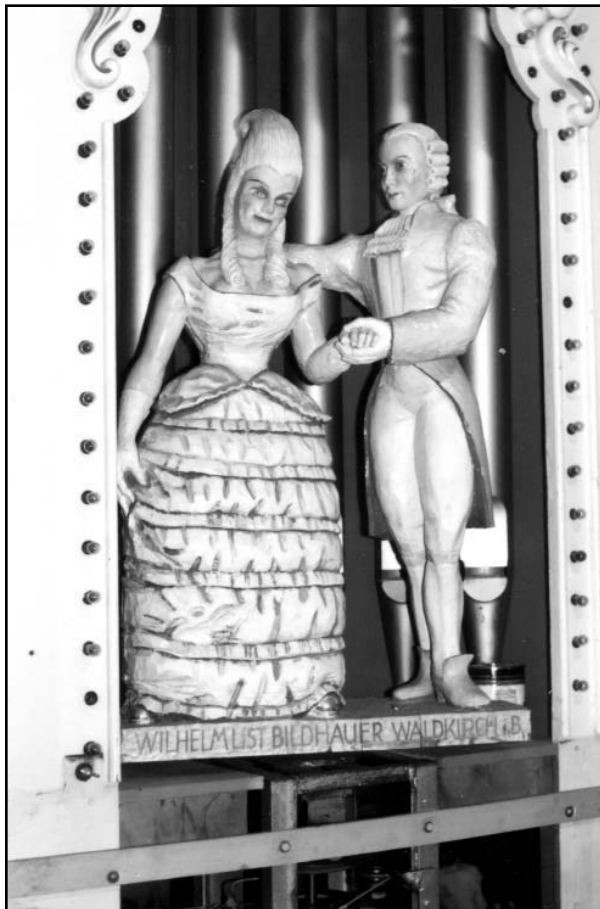


Figure 8. One of two pair of dancing figures.

Photo: Jack Hewes

register so they shut-off with the clarinets when the violins play solo. This allows the organ to play 17 piccolo notes and 22 melody notes using 34 holes with the five note “overlap.”

There are a total of 374 pipes in the organ (Figure 9). In the melody section there are five ranks of violins, one rank of flutes, one rank of violas and one “harmonic violin.” The accompaniment section includes a



Figure 9. An inside view of the massive 89-keyless Carl Frei organ.

Photo: Jack Hewes

one-foot stopped flute; a two-foot stopped flute and a two-foot cello. The counter-melody section contains a 20-note saxophone (baritone) voice, 20 four-foot cellos, 20 two-foot open flutes, 20 four-foot stopped flutes and 20 two-foot stopped flutes. There are essentially three ranks of piccolos with one rank borrowing the five lowest notes from the harmonic violin section. The bass section consists of eight large stopped flues with two ranks of bass “helpers” plus the eight trombones playing on independent holes. Additional instrumentation consists of a set of bell bars or glockenspiel, plus the snare drum and bass drum.

Quite often while listening to this (or any other) organ, people will ask how many pipes are there? While there are quite a few pipes in this particular instrument, I believe the total number of pipes is just one of the many factors involved for pleasurable listening (and versatility). Other aspects to be taken into consideration include balance in voices, and “overall balance” section to section (i.e., melody, accompaniment, counter-melody, etc.) as well as tuning and especially arrangements of the music. To my ear, it seems that Carl Frei was most successful in achieving all of these things with this organ.

One of the most appealing factors to me was the accompanying music. I’ve always believed it is important to have a sizable library of music and there were over 500 meters with the organ—ready to play. The added bonus of the music being Carl Frei compositions and arrangements made the package even more attractive not to mention some outstanding overtures and classical potpourris arranged by the master, Gustav Bruder. Carl Frei procured all of the Gustav Bruder master arrangements, which explains how these were included in the repertoire. In addition to the music which accompanied the organ,

over the years, numerous overtures, medleys, and popular tunes have been purchased from Marcel van Boxtel and other arrangers. Presently there are almost 1,500 meters of music which have given many hours of pleasurable listening and we are looking forward to many more.

Photo credits: the author unless otherwise noted.

Herb Brabandt is a retired technical manager who has been collecting music boxes and organs for 40 years. He is especially interested in large fair and band organs, and lives with his wife, Jo Ann, in Louisville, KY.