Mediocre Restoration and Regulation*

I respectfully submit that in all cases where you have noticed mediocre musical results coming forth from an automatic instrument made during the "Golden Age" (circa late 1890s-1930), it is the fault of mediocre restoration or regulation, NOT mediocre standards of the original manufacturer.

I say this after restoring, regulating, and tuning hundreds of orchestrions of nearly every brand for over 30 years, always paying special attention to the musical finishing touches. I've also arranged over 300 music rolls and books for orchestrions and organs, and I've always been careful with note lengths, percussion timing, automatic registers, etc.

Certain technicians have glossed over the minute finishing touches that sometimes take 10%, 20%, or more of the total restoration time, because they believe "the customer has a tin ear, can't hear the difference and won't pay for it."

To the contrary, I've found that most collectors *can* hear the musical improvement even when they don't know the technical reasons for it. I've been rewarded time and time again when the owner of an instrument said "Wow — I never knew it could sound that good!" To me, that's what restoration is all about.

I'll never understand the mind of the technician who thinks repairing three instruments makes him or her more knowledgeable than the factory which made thousands of instruments — instruments that made good music for years of heavy commercial use, given a little proper tuning and maintenance. If the instruments didn't sound good when they were new, they would not have been a commercial success.

One example of a mechanism that very few people understand is the Seeburg reiterating snare drum mechanism. If you've heard one instrument, or 10, or 20 that didn't sound good, that doesn't mean the instrument didn't sound good when it was new. Only when one understands the relationship of bleed size, pouch dish, pouch porosity, valve travel, loud and soft vacuum levels, pneumatic span, lost motion between beater pneumatic and reiterating valve, original beater wire length, original beater weight, beater to head travel, pneumatic stop position, pneumatic open rest position, batter head material and thickness, snare head material and thickness, head tension and tuning, snare material, snare tension, and many other subtle factors, *only then* should that person pronounce judgment on a design.

Very few original instruments are still playing with their original materials and regulation. Since most have already been through one or more careless restorations, most of the original factory specs are long gone. Therefore, when an observer pronounces judgment on what he or she assumes are original specifications, in most cases they are actually criticizing sloppy rebuilding or incomplete regulation, perhaps going back as far as the late 1940s.

I'm not saying that a technician must have vast experience in order to understand how to make something sound good. Some individuals have been very successful with their first restoration, while others will never benefit from their experience.

In my opinion, the furthering of mechanical music is always better served by an attitude of careful respect for the original instruments than the more prevalent "I heard ten instruments that didn't sound good; therefore the manufacturer didn't know what it was doing."

Assume that in nearly all examples, if something doesn't work right, it just isn't fixed right. Then try to learn how to fix it right!

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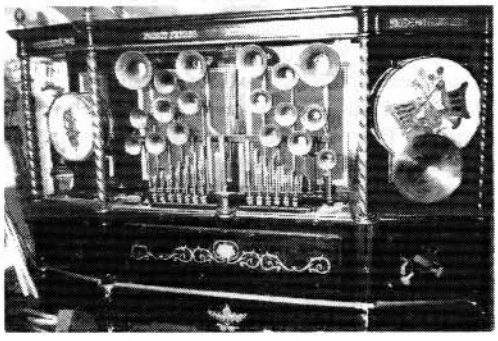
A concert militaire band built in Mirecourt, France, by the firm Poirot frs. in 1885.

Photo and information from Francoise Dussour.



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