

A Marriage of Convenience Mechanical Instruments Before 1800

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When searching out the earliest history of mechanical musical instruments, especially those used by people playing in public as an “occupation,” there are usually certain words and items associated with this period.

These items could include peep shows, shadow shows, various physical acts (juggling, tumbling, etc.), puppet shows, animal shows and last, but not least, the Magic Lantern show. Also associated with this group are the words “itinerant” and “Savoyard.” “Itinerant,” when used in connection with these showmen, simply means traveling from place to place denotes sometimes a derogatory connotation. “Savoyard” refers to Savoy, a former duchy bordered by France, Switzerland and Italy, and it is now a part of France.

This article is about the close relationship between the magic lantern, (i.e. the first slide projector) and the crank organ and their earliest use by traveling or, in the larger cities, street corner showmen. This connection cannot be found in most organ histories. The time span from 1700 to 1800 is fairly fuzzy. It was not until after 1800, when Ignaz Bruder improved on a mechanical organ (invented, or improved, earlier by Barberi and the Gavoli’s, who were building some small organs before they moved to Paris around 1845) does this history become clear.



There is a history before 1800 and is inadvertently documented along with the history of the magic lantern as shown by **Figures 1 and 2**. Prints produced by Bouchardon and dated Paris, 1737. Figure 1 is entitled ‘L’Orgue de Barbarie,’ almost certainly referring to one of the known inventors of the mechanical organ, Barberi, as mentioned earlier. Whether these prints feature the organ, as we “Grinders” perceive, or the magic lantern as we “Lanternists” perceive, it is noted that in Figure 2. The organ is unceremoniously turned on end and placed on the floor (or street) to be used only as a platform for the box and magic lantern. These prints seem to indicate that in some areas, organs were marketed to the public at this early date. The number of magic lantern prints (wood block, engravings, copper etching) from this era far outnumber mechanical instrument prints. The reasons for this is two-fold. First, is the way the magic lantern evolved and second, how it was perceived by the public. The magic lantern was conceived and evolved in the scientific community, along with the telescope, microscope and various nautical instruments relating to optics.

The “magic” in magic lanterns was not just a catch word, but describes the awe and esteem in which they were held.

The discovery of optical principles and the ability to fashion glass lenses was the domain of universities and independent scientists and experimenters. From the drawings of Giovanni Da Fontane in 1420 to the perfection of the magic lantern about 1660 and public access by 1700, the magic lantern was considered a scientific instrument. More than 30 prints exist of magic lanterns before the print in Figure 1. Lanterns were featured or mentioned in many scientific papers and also appeared on trade cards of merchants selling scientific instruments to universities and scientists.

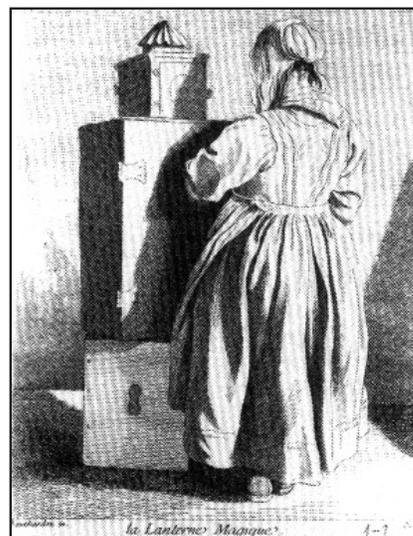


Figure 1 (left) and 2 (right). It must be remembered that all the illustrations are prints from etchings, engravings or wood blocks, and may or may not be accurate representations of actual events. For instance, would it be plausible or possible for a lone female to be a street corner performer in 1737 Paris with both organ and lantern?

The public perception in 1737 and for the next 150 years can be summed up in one word, “Magic!” The magic in magic lanterns was not just a catch word, but describes the awe and esteem in which they were held.

Getting back to our main concern, the early pairing of the crank organ and the Magic Lantern, at least ten prints exist spanning from 1737 to 1831. Since prints needed skill to produce and were expensive, their existence would indicate some importance and common knowledge of the organ grinder/lanternist. A close inspection of Figures 1 and 2 reveals some interesting facts. These may be the earliest prints of the pairing of a crank organ and a magic lantern, the first prints of a female organ grinder, and the first prints of a female lanternist.

If the scene represented is accurate as the well drawn magic lantern would indicate, then the organ with its molded lid, sturdy base, and iron crank would indicate some sort of workshop was up and running shortly after 1700.

“Savoyard” refers to Savoy, a former duchy bordered by France, Switzerland and Italy, and now a part of France.

The well-detailed clothing the woman is wearing in the two prints seem a little out of place, certainly not the rumpled, patched, soiled outfit I envision on an itinerant show person. Perhaps being a permanent resident of Paris would explain her well-kept person.

The large box cabinet shown appears in many prints of itinerant lanternists and dual grinder/lanternists. It is sometimes suggested the purpose of the box was for carrying lantern slides; but that could not have been its sole use.

Lantern slides were made of glass to withstand the heat of an open flame, the light source used for projection. The slides are heavy and a cubit foot of slides would weigh over a hundred pounds.

The box cabinets represented seem to be 2 to 5 cubic feet in size, much too large for slides alone. The boxes could have contained personal items, peddlers wares or perhaps a peep show.

Peep shows were very popular in this era, an oft mentioned choice of the itinerant showmen. The peep show of this era was simply a large wooden box with one or more peep holes for observing the box’s contents. Although sometimes containing risqué drawings, etc., the box could also contain any freak of nature—real or faked, small objects seen through a magnifying glass mounted in the peep hole, or perhaps a shrunken head acquired from a well-traveled sailor.

Any contents that would get a person’s curiosity aroused enough to pay for a view would do. Hmmm! Pay for view? That sounds familiar.

Figure 3, although not showing any musical instrument seems to be a more realistic representation of an itinerant’s appearance. This hand-colored print from 1757 presents a male lanternist with unkempt appearance and rumpled clothes with

two large coarse patches on his coat. The small box behind the magic lantern seems to be the right size to hold the lantern slides. Note the worn and weathered appearance of the lantern and two boxes.



Figure 3. This print is used here to illustrate the appearance of, one would think, the usual itinerant. The clothing in most scenes match the audience for which the show is presented.



Figure 4. This 1780 hand-colored woodcut copy of an earlier 1773 etching mislabels the crank organ a hurdy-gurdy. The earlier etching had it right; mechanical organ, magic lantern, and boy with small animal for showing. Both versions label the man as “Savoyard.” Small animals, usually not indigent to an area, shown as entertainment, were very popular; and Italian children later specialized in white mice.

Whatever their occupation, these early wanderers could not afford the price of a bed in a cozy inn. An unused shed or barn would certainly serve this purpose, or, if caught between towns, the stars would have to do for a roof. I can only imagine the roads these people traveled, dusty and hot in the summer or muddy and rutted after rains in the spring or fall.

The icons in **Figures 4** through **11**, are explained in their accompanying captions which may contain my opinions. Feel free to make your own.



Figure 5. The next five prints, ranging from 1780 to 1822, have several things in common—all the lanternists seem to be itinerants, as they all have organ grinder assistants.

Noticeably absent in all of these and other prints is any kind of conveyance or beast of burden to help carry the load. Even a small hand cart may have been a burdensome expense not suited to these itinerant showmen.



Figure 6. Although in the shadows, the crank appears to be on the side of the boy's instrument and not on the end as it would be on a hurdy-gurdy.



Figure 7 (above), 8 (below) & 9 (bottom). The images, thrown by the lanterns are all exaggerated—they would be neither as large or bright as shown; and the people would be crowded as close as possible to the screen. These early lanterns used a single or rarely double candle or wick flame; and it cast at best a dim scene, certainly not bright enough to reflect back and illuminate the audience.



In the print captions is also noted that name confusion between organ and hurdy-gurdy existed before 1800.

In Paris, Europe and later the United States, the itinerant showmen were lumped together as Savoyards because, for several centuries earlier, various tradesmen, especially chimney sweeps, street sweepers and laborers were making yearly treks to Paris and other cities in France from the duchy of Savoy. Since there were off-seasons in these lines of work, many itinerants became street musicians to fill the voids. The instrument of choice for these early musicians from Savoy was the Hurdy-Gurdy, which almost became a generic term for any street instrument.

Figure 10 (& front cover) are perhaps the earliest icons of the monkey/organ connection, both by the same printer and engraver done in 1800. Also from 1800, another anonymous print exists (not shown) depicting a lantern show on a religious theme that involves a monkey. The monkey is perched on the magic lantern accepting a coin in exchange for a religious item that appears to be a rosary. After 200 years, this connection still exists in the public's mind; a public that has little knowledge of these organs or their history.



Figure 10. An image by the printer, C. Huet, and engraver, J. Guelord, and produced in Paris circa 1800. Some credit this duo with the organ/monkey connection; but it would not have been a printer but a showman who would have recognized the potential of a trained monkey.

The monkey organ will outlive the magic lantern and its direct descendent—the automatic slide projector; but consider this: A few of our members continue to use a slide projector to this day to entertain a captive audience!

Since the magic lantern could only be used in a darkened room or at night, a crank organ is a logical choice as partner. The organ could be played throughout the day as a money-maker and also to draw a crowd for the lantern show and as accompaniment. From some of the prints, it is obvious these duos were welcomed into the drawing rooms of the wealthy. Whether from the novelty or rarity, they seem to have public acceptance.

With the improvement in the projection and increase in size of the lanterns, their partnership seems to have mostly faded by 1820.

By 1820, a wavering peace had settled over Europe after years of war, boundary line changes, and political upheavals. The population in Italy was especially hard hit. Split into regions by natural or political boundaries, small family plots could no longer support a growing population and higher taxes in a disrupted economy.

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With few options, families misguidedly indentured children for up to three years to village locals to be used as animal displays, musicians, trinket sellers, organ grinders, or outright beggars. It started with dozens, then hundreds, then thousands, as the children were disbursed throughout Europe, England, North and South America. The history changed from being recorded as icons to being recorded on police ledgers and children's aid society records.

The public's perception of the street corner performer had changed from acceptance to fear and distrust. This sad era is a story of its own; and I choose to dwell in the simpler past, when the village children would hear distant music and rush out and gleefully accompany an itinerant organ grinder and lanternist to the village square. There, the fellow would remove the huge box with a strange instrument mounted on it from his back, and play his organ for the gathering crowd. The adults would have mixed emotions, thoroughly enjoying seldom heard music, but eyeing the strange object on the box with mistrust, for they had heard rumors that demons, ghosts and devils could appear from that thing.

Have we missed out by not being a part of that age? No, not really, as we can still draw a crowd of children around us with our organs, and in addition, we have the privilege of seeing rare instruments and being among people who are keeping these memories alive.

Boy, are we lucky!

All illustrations accompanying this article are used with the permission of "The Magic Lantern Society" of the United Kingdom and are from their publication, *The Lantern Image*.

The memory of a player piano seen when I was five or six years old was followed by acquiring and restoring one some 40 years later—not bad for a true procrastination! Now, my wife, Mary, and I enjoy all aspects of mechanical music, especially the organ rallies. This article is an attempt at partial payback to the people who keep the organization running.