

The B.A.B. Organ Company

Matthew Caulfield

The beginnings of the B.A.B. Organ Company, Brooklyn, N.Y., can be traced back to one E. Bona. The “E” probably stands for “Ernesto,” rather than for “Ervista,” as I understood until recently. It was the practice of the principals in the company to abbreviate their forenames, so that even instrument nameplates (**Figure 1**) and company letterheads did not reveal forenames.



Figure 1. Bona & Antoniazzi, nameplate from street piano.

Little is known about Bona, except that he died in 1934, leaving the organ company he founded (then located at 340 Water Street in Manhattan) in the hands of his two partners who had started as his apprentices, Andrew Antoniazzi and Dominick Brugnolotti. Exactly when Antoniazzi and Brugnolotti graduated from apprentices to partners is uncertain, since such information as I could find comes from newspaper interviews with them in later years, and the events they describe sometimes cannot be reconciled.

The enterprise, not yet named “B.A.B. Organ Company,” made street pianos and hurdy-gurdies. Early examples of them name only Bona and Antoniazzi as manufacturers. The piano on which the nameplate shown in Figure 1 appeared is owned by Jay Hodgens, Huron, SD, and bears this plaque on its side:

HURDY GURDY
USED BY DEMOCRATIC PARTY
1928
WHEN AL SMITH WAS THEIR CANDIDATE
FOR
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

In an interview published in the Kings County section of the *Sunday News* (NY) for Oct. 5, 1958, Andrew Antoniazzi lamented, “We made our last carousel organs, hurdy-gurdies and orchestral pianos almost 20 years ago [ca. 1938].” A mainstay of the company’s business was the conversion of European organs playing book music and American organs playing rolls no longer being made to their own brand of music rolls. They

developed a number of roll sizes ranging from 48 holes to 87 holes, with scales designed to play well on American organs such as Artizan and on European organs such as Bruder. In addition they also did maintenance and repair of automatic musical instruments.

If nameplates such as on the Hodgens piano can be trusted, Andrew Antoniazzi reached partnership status with Bona before Dominick Brugnolotti did. In the interview cited, Antoniazzi (**Figure 2**), who was 78 at the time of the interview (therefore born in either 1879 or 1880), claims that he began making organs 52 years earlier, which would be about 1906. The writer of the article states, “He and two partners established the B.A.B. Organ Co. in 1906, soon after Antoniazzi came here from Italy.” Antoniazzi mentions learning carpentry in Italy, where his father owned a water-powered flour mill near Parma.



Figure 2. Andrew Antoniazzi as a young husband and organ maker.

A transcript of Antoniazzi’s immigration document supplied by his granddaughter Andrea Antoniazzi Giannuccielli Devlin shows that he arrived in New York Feb. 15, 1906, on the ship *Majestic*, departing from Liverpool, England, and was admitted as a 26-year-old single Italian male. This makes the quoted statement above about establishing the B.A.B. Organ Company in 1906 very suspect. What is more likely is that some kind of a business arrangement involving apprenticeship was entered into at that time. Additional information supplied by Andrea indicates that Antoniazzi emigrated from Parma, where his grandfather was mayor, and that he had attended medical school before emigrating.

The following details about Dominick Brugnolotti’s early life are taken from a letter written by his granddaughter Eleanor B. Fitzgerald in 1987 to Fred Dahlinger. Domenico Brugnolotti was born ca. 1877 and came to America at the age of 15 (ca. 1892; but see below where Dominick gives the date as Nov. 16, 1891). Not being an American citizen at the time he turned 18, Domenico was called to service in the Italian Army, and he willingly reported for duty, serving from 1896 to 1899. In spite of not meeting height requirements—he was about 5’ 8” tall—he served in the Cavalry with pride (**Figure 3**) and became Company Clerk because of his English proficiency. His horse was named Garibaldi. He is entered in a Company manual on the page captioned “Ruolino del 5° Squadrone” (Roster of the 5th Squadron) as no. 10 on the list, “Caporale Domenico Brugnolotti, [from?] Distretto Piacenza.”

In an undated clipping from the 1949 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, reporter Jane Corby writes that “The B.A.B. Organ



Figure 3. Dominick (Domenico) Brugnolotti in the Italian Cavalry Service, 1896-99.

Company occupies two floors of a neat red brick building, evidently a converted residence. But ... the partners remember it only as an organ repair factory and their combined memories go back to around 1891, when they began as apprentices ... Brugnolotti has been in the business of organ repair, including the repair of church organs, which he does as a side line, since the day after he stepped off a boat from Italy in 1891. He was 15 then. His uncle worked for the firm Brugnolotti now owns and he got the boy a job. In 1918 Brugnolotti and Antoniazzi, who had also been in the same line for several years, became partners [with Bona?].”

An unidentified, undated (but ca. 1953) newspaper clipping supplied to me by Brugnolotti’s grandson Ed Radonic quotes Dominick Brugnolotti as claiming “I arrived Nov. 16, 1891, and put my feet in this building. I began to work on the organs.” But this cannot be taken literally, because the building he was in when being interviewed was the second of two shops occupied by the firm.

Bona’s original shop was at 340 Water Street in Manhattan, a site probably later demolished to make the multi-lane approach to the Brooklyn Bridge. In 1939 the two remaining partners (Bona had died in 1934) moved to 112 32nd Street, Brooklyn, a building on the corner of 32nd Street and Third

Avenue, near the Bush Terminal of the Brooklyn harbor. The building was formerly the shop of G. Molinari & Sons, who started organ building there in 1862, and much of the Molinari shop equipment passed to B.A.B. with the sale. I thought that this shop may have become another casualty of urban expansion, being approximately where the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway now runs, but Ed Radonic reports that the shop is still there.

Brugnolotti (Figure 4) died in 1957, leaving Antoniazzi alone in the shop. Brugnolotti’s son, Aldo, had quit the dying business in favor of auto body repair, and apparently Antoniazzi’s offspring had no desire to follow in his footsteps. Several different spellings of Brugnolotti’s forename are found in sources, Domenico, Dominic, Domenick, Dominick; but his descendants know him as Dominick. They also know Bona as Ernesto Bona, not Ervista, a name which, when I “Googled” it to see how common it might be as a name, came up with zero hits. Poor Ernesto Bona ... he is in danger of being totally lost to history, because in the Bowers “Encyclopedia” he is called “E. Borna” and in most other sources “Ervista Borna” or “Ervista Bona,” effectively erasing both his names from the record.



Figure 4. Dominick Brugnolotti in the BAB shop, Brooklyn.



Figure 5. Andrew Antoniazzi, at the end of road, 1958.

Andrew Antoniazzi (**Figure 5**) died in 1967. His spouse Julia, a stunningly elegant lady in the portrait supplied by granddaughter Andrea (**Figure 6**), lived almost to the age of 100, dying in 1988 and leaving behind nine children. Perhaps the Antoniazzi and the Brugnolotti were in competition, because Dominick's wife, Caterina (d. 1935), also had nine children.

In 1958 Senator Charles Bovey bought the effects of the B.A.B. Organ Company—but not the name—from Antoniazzi. The sale included the surviving Molinari equipment and seven organs, sold on the condition that they never be displayed in operating condition. The interesting story of this acquisition and its removal in two large semi-trailers by Sen. Bovey, with the help of Oswald Wurdeman, to his Virginia City, Mont., frontier town restoration, is told and illustrated on p. 297-301 and p. 309-310 of *The Golden Age Of Automatic Musical Instruments*, by Arthur A. Reblitz.



Figure 6. Julia Antoniazzi, mother of 9, and wife of Andrew

Oswald "Ozzie" Wurdeman, ran (as his father before him had done) a Mills Violano-Virtuoso franchise out of Minneapolis, Minn., eventually expanding the business to include Western Electric coin pianos and other music machines. Ozzie began spending summers in Montana to service the machines in the Bovey collection, which is how he got involved in 1958 in moving the B.A.B. factory effects from Brooklyn to Montana. Once moved, most of the equipment stayed in

Virginia City and is still on display there, although the Bovey Restoration, as it was known, is now state-owned. But some roll-perforating equipment and music-roll masters of various scales that Ozzie judged to be most worthwhile were taken by him back to Minneapolis, where he proceeded to make and sell B.A.B. band organ rolls.

A customer could choose any combination of ten tunes from the available masters, and Ozzie would cut a run of copies, numbering the new roll in the 300's (and on up) to distinguish it from an original B.A.B. roll, all of which had two-digit numbers. Apparently the custom-order customer would pay a premium price for his copy of the roll and for the privilege of choosing the tunes, leaving Ozzie to sell the remaining copies at a reduced price. The result of this practice is that certain tunes were repeated from roll to roll and the resulting roll programs were of varying quality, because the customer choosing the tunes to make up the program had only the tune titles to go by and probably little feeling for what would make a good program.

The B.A.B. roll masters that remained back in Montana were no longer used to make rolls. Ozzie worked only with those he had taken back to Minneapolis. Ozzie's son, Tom, carried on the work of producing custom B.A.B. rolls for a time. But he eventually sold the equipment and masters to Ed Openshaw, who has it all in storage in Rumney, N.H. Tom supplied me in 1989 with copies of Ozzie's notebooks, detailing the masters that came from the B.A.B. shop and showing which ones were taken to Minneapolis. Ozzie also attempted to sort the masters of each roll size, to show what tunes went on what original B.A.B. roll; but he had only partial success. The masters for a given roll were stored together in a cloth bag. The masters were bulky and unclearly labeled. The bags were filthy and difficult to sort. Carting them to Montana and then taking some back to Minneapolis must have complicated the sorting problem immensely.



Figure 7. B.A.B. master rolls stored in Virginia City, Nevada.

Wurlitzer band organ roll masters are punched, using mallet-driven hand punches, into heavy cardboard on a three-to-one scale (i.e. each note perforation in the master is three times as long as the perforation will be in the resulting rolls; while the width of the perforations is also greater in the master than in the

roll, the hole spacing is the same in both, .1227” on center). But B.A.B. masters probably resembled in most regards the finished rolls. The chief evidence leading to that conclusion is the picture of B.A.B. master rolls printed as fig. 8 of Ron Bopp’s article about Ozzie Wurdeman (*Oswald, “Ozzie” Wurdeman-A Lifetime Love of Mechanical Music*) in issue no. 5 (Oct. 2000) of the *Carousel Organ* (Figure 7). Further evidence is the fact that B.A.B. rolls were produced on an Acme perforator, not capable of handling Wurlitzer-type masters, and the fact that all ten masters for a given B.A.B. roll were stored in a single cloth bag.

The Virginia City collection is said to have a fairly complete collection of original B.A.B. rolls, which theoretically could be used today to identify roll contents and even to produce new copies, notwithstanding that the underlying masters are now on opposite sides of the United States. Several of the newspaper articles about the B.A.B. shop mention the “stacks of dusty sheet music dating back to 1912” that were there. But it does not seem likely that either Antoniazzi or Brugnolotti did any of the music arranging for their company. Too little is known about Bona to say whether he might have or not.

It is common knowledge that Q.R.S. arranger J. Lawrence Cook moonlighted doing arranging for B.A.B., and he is probably responsible for the music on all but the early rolls. The early rolls were of different character than Cook arrangements and contained more Italian tunes. In an email to me written in September 2000 Art Reblitz observes, “The Bovey collection has some classical music on 87-key rolls for the big Gavioli that was obviously arranged by someone else. Also in the collection were numerous hand-written music manuscripts arranged specifically for band organs. I made copies of some of them for my files. They appear to be written by people who spoke and wrote Italian as their primary language.”

This next is pure speculation, but perhaps E. Bona was the Italian arranger of early B.A.B. rolls! He died, as already said, in 1934. Looking at the attempt to reconstruct the contents of all 44 of B.A.B.’s 66-key rolls shown on my Wurlitzer 165 website (see <http://wurlitzer-rolls.com/appendix.html#ORIGINALS>), one can see a slight chronological interruption in roll issuance between 1933 and 1935, and perhaps a change in the flavor of B.A.B. rolls before and after 1934.

Every visitor to the B.A.B. shop on 32nd Street seems to have been impressed by the Imhof & Mukle orchestrion that stood on the shop floor and was played to demonstrate B.A.B. rolls. That machine is one of the memories that stuck in the mind of young Ed Radonic from his many visits to his grandfather’s shop. The Radonics and the Brugnolottis all lived within four blocks of the 32nd Street shop. In the online *Mechanical Music Digest* for July 28, 2005, Ed recalls “a large band organ which had a stained-glass depiction of Mount Vesuvius erupting

with the sparks flying up and dropping into the sea. The motion was created by a light-wheel behind the glass that turned when the band organ played. It played the overture from Faust. This organ is mentioned in the jacket notes on an album of carousel organ and music box music in which my grandfather is referred to as “Doctor Dominick,” a nickname he apparently acquired because he was an organ doctor. I was told that Irving Berlin would sit on the steps of the shop waiting for my grandfather to arrive and would give him original manuscripts of his songs ... to punch onto organ and piano rolls, so that his music would be heard by the public. J. Lawrence Cook would mark the rolls for my grandfather so that he would know where to punch the holes.”

A column in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, Oct. 10, 1952, by Margaret Mara, describing her visit to the B.A.B. shop notes the same instrument and calls it a “nine-foot-high music box that originally entertained customers of an East New York saloon. Made by E. Boecker, it is equipped with snare drum, bass drum, bells, cymbals, violin, viola and piano, and produces the volume of a band concert in the park. The facade of the cabinet is topped with colored lights that flash on and off as the music plays. The center is decorated with mural on glass, a pastoral scene with an erupting volcano in the background. The volcano pours forth smoke as the lights flash. Add all that to the cacophony of the music and you really have something for the customers. This museum piece is in perfect running order and you can buy it for \$1,000.”

That description is about as accurate as most you find in newspapers. The orchestrion being described is an Imhof & Mukle. Ernest Boecker Organ and Orchestrion Company was an importer and agent for Imhof & Mukle whose inventory was auctioned off June 11, 1914. The orchestrion had been retro-fitted to play B.A.B. rolls. It is now owned by collectors Frank and Shirley Nix, Woodland Hills, Calif., who had it restored back to its original format.

The B.A.B. name lives on today in the person of Gavin McDonough, Richmond, Va., who bought the rights to the company name from the heirs of the two partners in 1972 for \$500. Gavin learned the organ business by apprenticing himself for two years after graduation from high school in 1966 to Ralph Tussing, owner of the T.R.T. Manufacturing Company, North Tonawanda, N.Y., and successor to the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company’s band organ business. Gavin worked without pay, side-by-side with Mr. Tussing, to learn the secrets of band organ work. Today Gavin still uses the original B.A.B. letterhead that carries the names “D. Brugnolotti” and “A. Antoniazzi” in the upper left corner, but gives his Richmond address and telephone number.

Time marches on. The more things change, the more they remain the same.

Matthew Caulfield, a frequent contributor to these pages, began listening to the Seabreeze Wurlitzer 165 in the 1940’s and for the past 35 years has been researching the history of Wurlitzer and its band organ rolls