

An Afternoon with Victor Chiappa

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In late July of 1984, Mike Merrick and I found ourselves with a “free day” during the 4th International Convention of the Sons of the Desert, the world-wide Laurel and Hardy appreciation club. What made this free time so significant was that we were in London, England at the time.

Mike, remembering that the organ firm of Chiappa was still in existence in London, suggested that we see if we could contact the company and drop in for a visit. Consulting the London telephone directory, we discovered that the firm of “Chiappa Ltd.” was indeed still listed. Dialing the number did not bring any success in reaching someone, however. With the rest of our fellow Stan and Ollie conventioners off on a “mystery trip,” we decided to go on a little mystery adventure of our own.



Figure 1. Tracy Tolzmann with Victor Chiappa outside the “Chiappa Ltd.-Organ Builders” Eyre Street Hill workshop and office in London, England. Behind the folding doors lay a treasure trove of large fairground organs!

Scrutinizing our London street map, we ascertained that we could get quite near to the Chiappa headquarters via the underground system. After a train transfer or two and a short walk at street level, we found ourselves standing at 31 Eyre Street Hill in front of “Chiappa Ltd.-Organ Builders.”

The three-story building seemed to have some activity taking place on the second floor, but loud and repeated knocking at the organ company’s door did not result in an answer. Chagrined but undaunted, we decided that another telephone

call was in order. Harrods Department Store was a short walk away, so we sauntered in that direction while we reconnoitered. Dialing the Chiappa number again resulted in an answer from Victor Chiappa, owner of the business and grandson of the firm’s founder, Giuseppe Chiappa. Arrangements were made to meet him back at the Eyre Street Hill address after lunch, around 1:00 PM. We eagerly awaited the appointed hour!

Arriving at Chiappa Ltd. that afternoon, we were warmly greeted by a short, stocky man with a thick shock of white hair. The nattily dressed yet slightly disheveled gentleman’s appearance belied his youthful demeanor. **Figure 1.** He extended his hand and in a soft-spoken, very English accent, Victor Chiappa welcomed us to his establishment. He invited us in, and we turned to climb a long flight of stairs, bypassing the second floor and bringing us to the third-story workshop and office of Chiappa Ltd.

Scattered throughout the entire room were assorted wood-working tools, equipment, and small organ parts. Mr. Chiappa admitted he hadn’t been doing too much work lately, especially since his last helper had died recently. He had been active building instruments using the 46-key Gavioli scale, and had done much maintenance work for Cushing, Mason, and other United Kingdom collectors. In recent years he had been busy replacing the bellows of many organs with blowers.

A small street organ under construction caught my eye and Mr. Chiappa said that it was the smallest model the firm produced,



Figure 2. Dozens of folding cardboard book music masters hung from racks in the Chiappa firm’s music library. Victor’s father Ludovico arranged and punched the music starting in 1918. Titles shown here are 46-key books. Chiappa built many 46-key instruments using the Gavioli scale.

a 28-key book organ, and that the firm also made the music books. (The instrument looked as if it had not been worked on recently, and Mike and I both wondered to ourselves if Mr. Chiappa would ever complete the project.)

Having mentioned book music, we inquired about the company’s music source. Mr. Chiappa guided us to his music room, where the entire floor space was covered with racks of folding cardboard book music masters, each suspended on special hangers. **Figure 2** The Chiappa music library



Figure 3. Mike Merrick pays rapt attention to Victor Chiappa's explanation about music book arranging.

consisted of book masters for instruments from 28 to 112 keys. Mr. Chiappa said his father, Ludovico, had arranged all of the company's music since 1918. Previously, it had been purchased from Gavioli and other firms. He told us "My current arranger is in his 90s and isn't doing much music now." Mr. Chiappa took a book master from its hanger and showed us some of the markings made by his father in the arranging process. **Figures 3, 4 & 5.** He explained how they used black lead on the inside of the book holes to ease the operation of the keys and that the sides and leading edge of each punching was varnished to prevent hole damage.

In his groundbreaking history, *Encyclopedia of Automatic Musical Instruments* (Vestal Press, c. 1972), Q. David Bowers reports that Ludovico's father and Victor's grandfather, Giuseppe, had worked for Gavioli & Cie. in Paris after immigrating from Italy.

Moving to London in 1864, he started his own firm building small hand-cranked barrel organs and some barrel pianos. Giuseppe moved to America in 1867 but returned to continue in the organ business in London in 1877. Victor's father, Ludovico, took over the firm with his brother, Charles, after Giuseppe's death. Three other brothers did not follow in their father's footsteps.

Mike and I inquired about other instruments that the company built, and Mr. Chiappa took us over to his large, cluttered, roll top desk in a small office area of the workshop. Here, he rummaged around to locate a pile of photographs of some of the organs that he and his father, uncle and grandfather had constructed. The beautiful black and white 8-by-10 glossies pictured magnificent instruments not unlike some of the large Gavioli organs. Not surprisingly, given his grandfather's apprenticeship with Gavioli in Paris, Chiappa organs use the Gavioli scale. The ornate facades revealed beautiful carvings and intricate pipe work and were true works of art.

As he flipped through the stack of pictures, Mr. Chiappa quietly reminisced about the history of each instrument. Several were still in use in England and on the continent, but sadly, with a definite sign of emotion in his voice, he told us of different organs and their fates, "This organ was lost during the blitz...this organ was in a devastating fire—this organ was destroyed in a flood" and so on.



Figure 4. Victor Chiappa shows how the folding music was laid on the arranging table and gathered in a special tray as the book lengthened. Note the clutter of organ parts in the background!

With an eye on the clock and an impending engagement back at our hotel, we reluctantly told Mr. Chiappa that we had to leave soon. As we descended the long stairway back to the sidewalk, we inquired about the company's future. Mr. Chiappa told us that, sadly, he was the only worker left, and that his own children, nephews and nieces had no interest in perpetuating the firm of "Chiappa Ltd.-Organ Builders." As young Americans and inquisitive organ enthusiasts, we impetuously asked Mr. Chiappa how old he was. In his quiet, measured tones he replied, "I'm just the same age as the century." Then the 84-year-old gentleman said he had a few more things to show us.

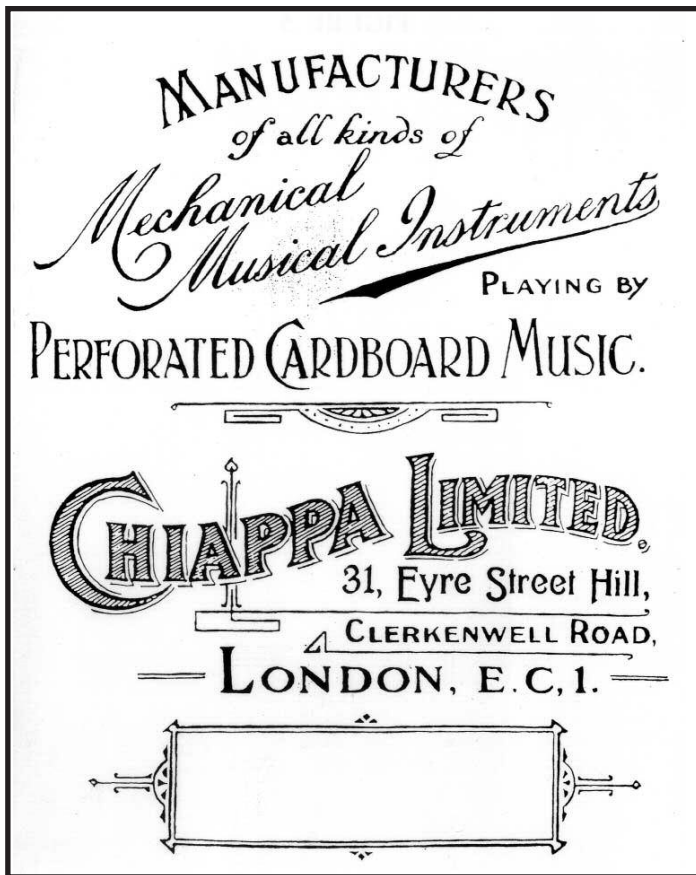


Figure 5. An original Chiappa music book title page (normally black graphics on red paper).

At the bottom of the stair was a doorway leading into a small street level storage area of Chiappa Ltd. The Chiappa firm had not only built their own organs, but also acted as sales agents for Gavioli, Gebr. Bruder, Marengi, Wilhelm Bruder Sohne, and Limonaire. Therein were three large and ornate 89 and 98-key organs awaiting repairs and restoration which Mike and I knew would probably never come at the hands of the company's patriarch. In the cramped garage-like area, a Gavioli and two Marenghis were standing too close together to even get a decent photograph of the awesome treasure trove.

A large Marengi organ at the front of the space was of special interest. The upper left portion of the case showed obvious signs of fire damage. **Figure 6.** Mr. Chiappa recounted the story of the instrument, telling us that the Marengi was in their possession at this very address during WWII. (Indeed, the Chiappa firm continued business "in" Eyre Street Hill—to use the vernacular of the country—in 1877 and remained in business at the same location these 107 years later!) World War II was raging, Luftwaffe blitzkrieg attacks on London were common place, and the public was on alert for any suspicious activity.

One evening, a fire erupted in the firm's ground floor storage area and a passing newspaper boy ran to sound the alarm. The fire brigade arrived in time to save the building and most of its contents, but the Marengi organ sustained heavy damage. The 14 year-old youth was feted a hero and set to receive a monetary reward for his quick action in reporting the fire. But his position as hero turned to that of arsonist when questioning about the incident found the boy confessing he had set the fire to claim the war time reward! Mr. Chiappa did not recall what became of the teen,

but confessed that the war years were certainly difficult for everyone, not just the organ business, and that desperate acts were not uncommon during those years.

With our time gone, Mike and I reluctantly bade our farewells and gratitude to Mr. Chiappa for his wonderful hospitality and unforgettable guided tour through his part of music history. Mr. Chiappa told us that he must hurry home as his daughter was probably awaiting his return with dinner on the table!

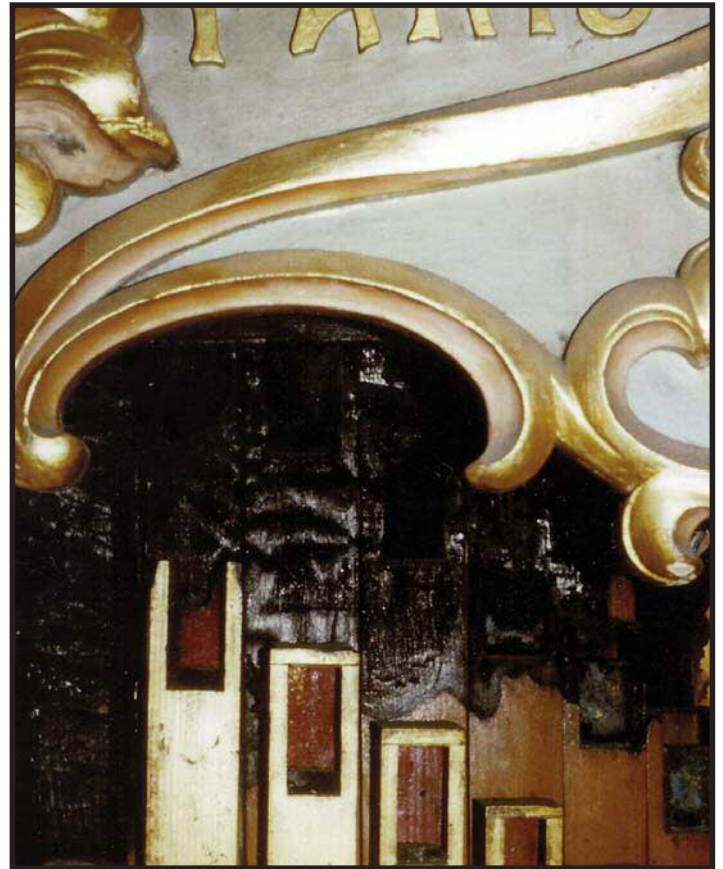


Figure 6. The Chiappa firm's Marengi fairground organ which was damaged by fire during WWII. Untouched for more than 40 years in 1984, Victor Chiappa still had hopes of restoring the mute instrument even at the age of 84.

Mike and I turned to walk back to the London Underground, glowing in our unique experience, knowing that we had just spent a fantastic afternoon with a true legend in automatic music, and realizing that the Victor Chiappa and "Chiappa Ltd.-Organ Builders" chapters in that history could soon come to a close.

[Post script: Noted organ historian Fred Dahlinger, Jr. reports that Victor Chiappa passed away on February 10, 1993, and that it appears the assets of the Chiappa Ltd. organ firm remain in the hands of his son, Albert Chiappa.]

Sunrise, Minnesota resident Tracy M. Tolzmann, is a COAA member and organ enthusiast who has co-owned an 1883-vintage 46-key Ruth-Artizan hybrid organ with Mike Merrick since 1980.

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Figure 7. A Chiappa & Sons advertising, promoting Military Bands. Chiappa & Sons was the former name of Chiappa Ltd.—the address of 6, Little Bath Street was re-named to the Eyre Street Hill address following the bombing of the area during WWII.

Photo courtesy: Tim Trager.