Organ Figures

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Mechanical organs have provided music for switchbacks, shows and merry-go-rounds for many a decade. They have provided much enjoyment and a unique atmosphere to the midways, first powered by hand cranking, then by steam engines and finally by electrical power. Many of the early organs were made by the famous Gavioli company of Paris (**Figure 1**) but later, other French organs, made by the Limonaire Brothers, Gasparini and Marenghi factories, joined an ever-growing market. In addition, there were instruments made in Germany—such as Bruder, Ruth, Wellershaus, Hooghuys, and Van Der Beeken, and Verbeeck from Belgium.

Figure 1. Two static organ figures carved by Demetz adorn the facade of a Gavioli & Cie fair organ.

Preserved today in many of our collections, these organs are a musical reminder of the past—a time often referred to as the "good old days." A prominent feature of many organs was some type of figurine (**Figure 2**), either an animated or static form which today we associate with fairground or band organs. It is in this respect that I would like to enlighten you with this article.

Figure 2. An animated conductor figure ready for action.

As to its precise origins the organ figure has a vague early history. In particular, just how they came to be carved for mechanical musical instruments is pretty obscure. It seems to stem back to the time when '*tableau vivant*' (living scenes) were very popular on the early street barrel organs, particularly those that were used in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century. Nobody is sure how they actually started to be used on fairground organs, but the early French instruments often were designed, (intentionally or by accident!) in the style of a European parlor "sideboard," which would have contained figurines and various other ornaments that a family would own. Fronts of the mid-19th Century large barrel organs often appeared to be similar to a sideboard, even with the mantle cloth which was often draped across the top of it (represented in carved work on the organ front) and perhaps the carved figures were intended to represent their china equivalents; those which were often proudly displayed on a sideboard. They were certainly added to provide an extra eye-catching attraction for the organ. After all, those instruments which have no figures on the front—unless they have moving lights or visual percussion mechanisms—can be pretty boring, from the view of the general public. My theory is that the appearance on the organ of "little people" acted as a draw to children and adults who would, perhaps, have found music emanating from a strange machine perhaps rather frightening!

In the 1880s, when impressively large French and German barrel organs—often up to 130 keys—were commonplace at European and American fairs, automated figures representing military servicemen (**Figure 3**) were at their height of popularity. Bandmasters tended to be dressed in an Army or Navy officers uniform, often complete with a plumed hat. There were large four feet high trumpet players standing at the side, superbly carved and painted in matching uniforms. They would turn their heads and raise their instruments to their mouths as the trumpet pipes of the organ came into play. This is consistent with the times when you consider that mechanical organs were indeed intended to represent and, in many cases replace, military bands. These appropriately termed "band organs" were, from the 1890s onwards, increasingly being used by showmen to replace their costly live bands which, previously, had commonly supplied music on the fairgrounds during the 19th century.

Figure 3. An ornately painted conductor figure dressed in military style.

Figure 4. A female figure carved in the "paraders" style.

As the Edwardian period (1901 - 1910) progressed, French-made organs sold into the English market, tended to be adorned with female figures carved in the "paraders" style (**Figure 4**). These were girls who literally paraded up and down on the stages of the hugely popular fairground variety or early cinema shows to attract the public inside the big tent behind. They were often dressed in the most revealing outfits, no skirts or dresses but tight pants—to show their legs—and very tight fitting corsets to accentuate their buxom hourglass figures! This was considered very risqué for the time! (**Figure 5**). On the organs used at Continental European showgrounds, however, it is interesting to note that few, if any, of the parader style of figure were to be found. In fact, on the organs that were sold to the European manufacturers "home" markets (France, Germany, Holland and Belgium) the figures were carved in the mid to late-18th Century styles of dress. Tri-corn hats, britches and tailcoats were most popular on the bandmaster figures, even if they were female! This was the 18th century court style (**Figure 6**). The girls would often represent shepherdesses with very flowing dresses, just stopping below the knee with high-heeled shoes with buckles, and complete with ornate hats (**Figure 7**).

Figure 5. A most risqué dresssing for an organ figure.

Figure 6 (left). A bandmaster complete with the tri-corn hat and long coat.

Figure 7 (right). A European-carved static organ figure wearing a long flowing dress.

The sources of figurines

Animated figures supplied with French-made instruments were nearly all made in northern Italy; in the Tyrol region. Having said that, organs sold by the Paris-based Limonaire Brothers firm tended to sport automata carved in their own factories or by local sculptors. Gavioli, Foucher-Gasparini and Marenghi organs featured superb automata made by the celebrated family of wood sculptors by the name of Demetz. They were, originally, from Spain, but had migrated to Tyrolean Italy, probably somewhere around the late 16th or early 17th century. They were famed world-wide for carving exquisite church Madonnas, saints, cherubs, putti and other decorative woodwork used in Catholic churches, particularly in the very heavily ornamented baroque-period churches built in Germany in the 17th & 18th centuries. Demetz carving is to be found widely throughout Europe, adorning many manually-played church organs. Their workmanship in both detail and quality is simply outstanding.

In Germany female figures carved in the "shepherdess" style typical of the court dress of the 18th century were popular. The southern-German town of Waldkirch (pronounced Vald-keer-k) in the Black Forest had become a centre of mechanical organ production with the firms of Wilhelm Bruder, Bruder Brothers (Gebrüder Bruder) and Adolf Ruth & Son, based there. Gavioli had established a subsidiary factory in the town from 1898. All these businesses bought automated figures carved by the well-known resident wood sculptor Joseph Dopp. Dopp and his workmen also designed and carved many beautiful organ facades. Some of his original watercolor designs are now preserved in the Waldkirch museum and the famous National Mechanical Musical Museum in Utrecht, Holland.

Restoration

Figure 8 shows five organ figures as I received them. As you can see, they were in a pretty dilapidated condition. Each was badly damaged by wood worm and the effects of time. They had come from a Gavioli organ believed to be about 87 keys. It had been owned by an Irish showman who had burned

Figure 8. Five organ figures remaining from a now-destroyed 87-key Gaviioli fair organ.

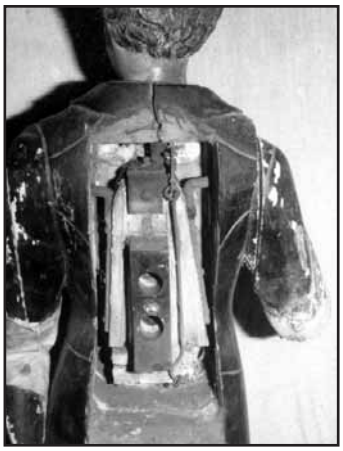

Figure 10 (left). The three articulation motor mechanism in the back of the unrestored figure.

Figure 11 (right). A restored view of the back of the conductor figure detailing the restored pneumatics.

the organ, for its insurance value, in hard times—just after World War II. Fortunately the figures were put to one side in a box and they lay in his winter quarters in Ireland until I received them in 1980. It is rare to find a set of five like this and I was quite excited when they were brought to me for restoration.

Figure 9. The conductor figure sans attached hands.

Figure 9 shows an overall photo of the conductor figure before I started restoration. He's fairly complete apart from the fact that his right foot is missing. While the arms are there his fingers are missing off his conducting hand. The mechanism for the three-way articulation was fairly complete although it had been attacked by wood worm. A rear view (**Figure 10**) shows the articulation motors taken before restoration. There are three bellows. The one on the left operates the left hand and is also coupled to a small motor at the very base of the section, which is connected to a rod to turn his head. On the right side is a motor which operates his conducting stick arm. The articulation section was very badly damaged by wood worm and I had to completely restore this by making new motors for the rebuilt figure. **Figure 11** is a photograph taken a month later, with the re-leathered motors installed and in 100% operation.

On the back of the conductor figure there are some rather oddly carved lines. I must admit I'm not too sure why the carver decided to put them in. They don't seem to enhance the look of the figure at all, but it is a reflection of how they did things in those days. The rear of the figure would probably never be seen by the general public visiting the fair; the carver just put them in anyway.

In another close-up of the conductor (before restoration was started—**Figure 12**), you can see, dangling from the end of his severed right arm, is the old rusted wire linkage which I had to replace to get the arm to conduct again. The main feature of this photo is the gilding which I did not reproduce on the restored figure. This is because this figure had been painted over many, many times by the showmen (during the winter recess) and the gilding work is not original. On a figure of this type it is unlikely that any fancy scroll work would have been applied. Instead, he would have had a rather more ornate waistcoat and just a bit of gilding around the edges of his jacket. **Figure 13** illustrates the completed, restored figure, and shows an ornate scrolled waistcoat to my own design while I left the jacket fairly plain. But, I did make sure that he appears to have silk collars and patent leather shoes. He has a rather majestic poise in this pic-

Figure 12. A detailed view reveals gilding added later by previous restorers.

Figure 13. The conductor figure now restored and ready to lead the band music.

ture, I think you would agree. He was carved, I believe, to represent the famous composer Johann Strauss II.

Now I will move on to the troop of girls which the majestic conductor looks after. First is a 2½ feet tall lady in a rather unusual style of costume. She is dressed in what is referred to in English fairground parlance as a "parader" (**Figure 14**). A parader would dress in a fanciful costume and parade up and down in front of the show on a wooden stage, which used to front the theater shows which were very popular on the fairgrounds at the turn of the 20th century. They would sing and dance in time with the music from the organ, which would have dominated the show front. They sometimes accompanied the organs strains with trumpets, clarinets and drums of their own and this all served to attract the "punters"—as the public were referred to—up to see the show. These paraders were reproduced by the Italian woodcarvers to stand as bell ringers on the fronts of the organs, and as far as I know, this style of dress was rarely reproduced for the continental European market, but was uniquely peculiar to the English market. I christened this one as "Calamity Jane" because she has a sort of cowgirl look to her, I think you'll agree.

Figure 14. Calamity Jane, a parader organ figure, in as-found condition.

Figure 15. A closeup of "Calamity Jane" stripped back to the bare lime wood shows the extensive woodworm damage.

Figure 15 details her left side, showing the damage which time and woodworm had caused to her. All of these holes have to be filled up. You can use a variety of material to do it. I usually use a plastic wood fiber, which has the advantage of shrinking into the holes and getting right into where the wood worm have done their worst. Alternatively, you can heat up "size," which is made from hot rabbit-skin glue mixed with whiting powder, and pour it into the holes. It is not particularly effective if the wood worm damage is widespread. You'll end up with a lot of sticky mess all over the wood which will then need to be sanded down, thus creating more work.

The **front cover photo** (right figure) shows the color scheme which I chose, complete with 23¾ carat gold leaf [*see box below*] scroll work, which I added as the final touch. She doesn't have the bell and striker in this picture as it wasn't made at the time of the photo. Finally, we can view another picture of Calamity Jane with her new look **(Figure 16).** The color of her hair has changed because she looked the sort that ought to be blond. After all, "Gentlemen prefer blondes.!"

Figure 16. A now-restored Calamity Jane ready to ring a bell to the beat of the music.

A note on gold leaf: 24 carat gold cannot be beaten into "leaf" form as the pure metal is too soft and would fragment during the manufacturing process. So, a small amount of copper is added to the molten gold before it is rolled into the thin plates which are subsequently hand-beaten to create the gold "leaves." this is why the highest quality gold leaf is 23¾ and not 24 carats. Greater amounts of copper and silver can be added to the molten gold when it is desired to produce gold leaves of varying tints and colors.

Figure 17 (left). The third figure of the group, as found.

Figure 18 (above). The same figure with all paint removed. More details of the carving can now be appreciated.

The third figure has a very tall, leggy look about her (**Figure 17**). She has a jauntily placed hat on her head and she wasn't quite so badly damaged as some of the others, but she has her right hand missing. This was the hand which holds the bell. All the figures had one or more of their hands missing, so it meant a few hours spent carving up new ones in limewood. In **Figure 18** we can see the figure with all the paint scraped off. A caustic-based paint stripper was used—it gets deep into the ornate carved work and immediately you can appreciate the beautiful craftsmanship of the Italian carver on this work of art.

Figure 19 (and front cover) details the new look for this very pretty young lady, complete with her jaunty hat, which seems to bring comments from onlookers. The color schemes are as original as I can make them. I usually scrape the paint off very carefully first to see what is underneath. In come cases it is not possible to decipher the original colors so I just let my imagination run wild, but keep it within the restrictions of the colors that would have been prevalent at the turn of the century. Again, the 23¾ carat gold leaf scroll work is of my own design. Note the cupid bow lip on her face, a look which was all the rage around the turn of the century.

Figure 19. Now restored, and painted to perfection, this bell ringer will enhance any organ.

The next figure is one I call "The Clown" because she is dressed in a style very reminiscent of that of a circus clown (**Figure 22**). She is beautifully modeled and is complete with a ruff and ornately-ribboned cocked hat. She had her left hand and arm completely missing, lost probably due to wood worm. Her right hand was a deformed stump which had previously been tacked on

Figure 20. Figure number four which I call "The Clown."

to the end of the arm. It obviously had been damaged many years ago during her days touring the fairgrounds of Ireland.

Restored as in **Figure 21 (and front cover)** she has been completely scraped down; a new arm carved, pneumatic motor made and articulation fitted in; and finally, painted. Again she features a Cupid's bow lip which was a desired feature of women around the turn of the 20th century.

Figure 21. The bell ringer seen in photo 20, now restored and in festive red colors.

Figure 22 (left) and 23 (right). A before and after restoration photo of the last of the five organ figures rescued from the Gavioli organ.

Last, is my favorite of the lot (**Figure 22**). She has a beautiful proportioned body, elegance and poise as well as a quite charming face. She wasn't quite so badly damaged as the rest of the group but unfortunately wood worm had gnawed their evil way into both of her arms, weakening them severely. I broke the wood worm infested areas away, which left her armless. I re-glued the sections and made them as strong as they were before. Apart from those repairs, re-applying the gesso and repainting, there was not a lot of work to do. The beautiful style of dress she was wearing gave me a chance to indulge my passion for gold scroll work on her to a rather pleasant degree (**Figure 23**).

Two more restorations

In **Figure 24** we see a three foot tall wooden bell ringer, which I recently restored. This one was carved by Vincenzo Demetz. He was the son of Ferdinand Demetz who had carved the previously seen figures. This one came also from a Gavioli fairground organ which is now out of existence. The figure is in quite a dilapidated state. As you can see both hands were missing as well as a good part of the right forearm. What was left was the rod (which originally had the hand on the end) which forms part of the striking mechanism. The most interesting feature I found with this figure was that she had been damaged at a very early part of her life and somebody had repaired the damage with the limited materials which were available at the time: sheet music was used to replace the areas of wood that were lost and gesso used to form the molded areas. "Gesso," as you may remember, is the plaster of Paris and glue mixture which is used as sort of a paint primer. It is used to seal and prepare the wood surface for painting, but when mixed in thicker quantities, it can be used very much like modeling clay.

Figure 24. Athree-foot bell ringer by Vincenzo Demetz.

Figure 25 shows the figure from the rear, with the original envelope motor still in place. It had become so stiff that recovering was necessary. Also you can clearly see the amount of damage at the rear of the figure. Not visible is the sheet metal which, at some time in her past had been used to repair the top of the head and her blouse.

Figure 25. The Demetz figure as seen from the back.

Figure 26. A restored Demetz organ figure detailing the fine carving technique.

Figure 27. A view of the restored air motors

Now here's the transformation—after a month's work she's beginning to look a lot prettier (**Figure 26**). There was a surprisingly beautiful face which she had under all that grime. This is a typical face of a Vincenzo Demetz figure, as he carved similarly styled faces for all of the 30-inch figures which he created, but yet, every one was slightly different in small details. You can appreciate the workmanship in the pinafore which he carved over her skirt, and the blouse, which she wears on top of it. Note the exquisitely formed face and the hat (which, except for a small part, I had to replace in its entirety) as well as the fine detail in the hair and in the blouse.

Viewing the figure from the rear (**Figure 27**) one can see the new envelope motor installed as well as the linkage ready for her to beat time again with the music, as she must have done so often in her past. My figures are always signed on the back with a date, and in some cases, I put a little note inside the woodwork (for any future restorer who may have to rebuild or repaint the figure). Looking closely at her very exquisite face, you can note an almost "medieval" look about her. You will be able to appreciate from Figure 26 that she is neither sad nor smiling, but she maintains a neutral, somewhat regal, pose which just about goes with any type of music.

The last organ figure featured in this article I restored during a visit with Ron and Mary Jo Bopp (**Figure 28**). This is a 2 ½ feet tall Demetz figure which was carved around 1880 or 1885. Originally she stood on a French barrel organ. As a barrel organ is an almost entirely mechanical instrument (pump excepted) the figure was worked by mechanical levers and linkages, not pneumatic envelopes. Instead, a linkage from a key on the barrel was connected directly to her arm, in order that she could strike the bell in time with the music.

Figure 28. A Demetz figure made between 1880 and 1885 and used on a barrel organ.

At some later point, however, she was converted to pneumatic operation, as there was evidence in the back when I acquired this figure (**Figure 29**). In addition she was quite badly damaged by those pesky woodworms! She had lost both hands one arms and a greater part of her hat.

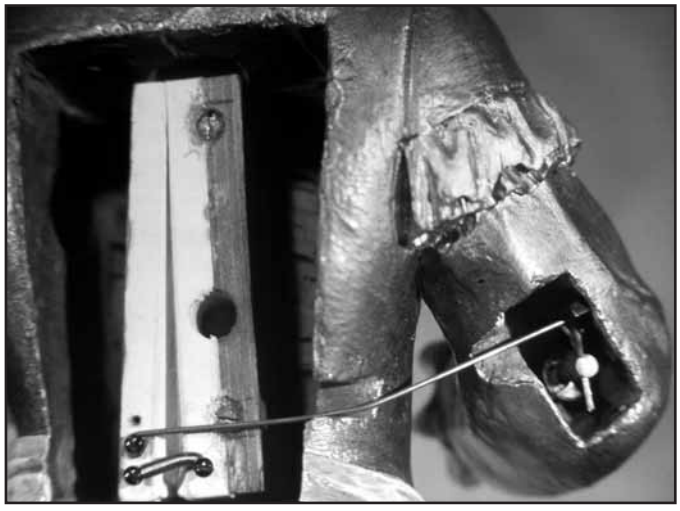

Figure 29. A conversion done to operate the Demetz figure with air pressure instead of a mechanical linkage.

Figure 30. The author with the restored Demetz organ figure.

It's unusual to find such an early figure still in existence (**Figure 30**). The reason for this is that many of these barrel organ figures were sold off as children's toys by showmen during the leaner times. And when the showmen changed to pneumatically operated fairground organs, the cruder barrel organ figures were not often wanted. This one bears the hallmarks of being carved possibly by Demetz or one of the minor wood sculpting studios. It's interesting to note from my point of view, that the carving is not quite as exquisite as on the later figures.

Gold Leaf

Gold leaf (**Figure 31**) is used for highlights much as it was used traditionally in the 18th and 19th centuries. There is a profession known as a "gilder" who is a person that spends all his or her life applying gold leaf and the medium is still used a great deal today. It is found particularly in bank buildings and other places where it is desired to establish an atmosphere of opulence by putting golden finials on tops of fences, or by tellers booths. Particularly in England, where I live, gold leaf is still used a great deal because old styles of architecture are still very much in evidence.

Figure 31. Materials needed for gold leaf application. Left to right, the special slow-drying varnish called gold "size;" yellow or red oil paint, used to color the size; and gold leaves beaten to precise 3.5" squares.

Conclusion

The art of carving wooden organ figures has almost been lost, but there are one or two people around in this hurried world that can still spend the time to carve a figurine in the wood. Descendants of the famous Demetz family are still in business in Boldzano and are producing church ornamentation, figurines and panels but, most strangely, not organ figures despite requests to do so! Ferdinand and Vincenzo, who I have referred to previously, must have really enjoyed their work. They must have loved carving wood and detailing these exquisite little figures. When you look at the rear of some of these creations, they are as ornate as the fronts. And when you consider that the rear of the figure would not have been seen you have to ask "why did they do it"?

They must have just had that feeling for what they were doing. They were craftsmen of the sort that are disappearing fast. I hope that in some small way I will grow to be able to recreate exactly what they were trying to portray in these beautiful carvings because I too have a love of these figures in particular and I spend a lot of time in putting back the detail which they had. It's funny, when I first started in this hobby, I thought it rather odd that they should go to the lengths of carving in the fingernails and little creases in the fingers and creases in the dresses and knees at the rear of the figure, but when I restore a figure, I find myself instinctively doing it. It must be in the blood!

Shane Seagrave has been passionate about mechanical organs since his childhood with a particular fascination for their facade design and the decorative techniques used by the French makers. Now aged 53, Shane also edits *Vox Humana*, the journal of the Mechanical Organ Owner's Society.

2007 Index of Articles

Due to the amount of excellent article material included in this issue the annual Index of Articles will appear in the next issue (Issue No. 34 — January, 2008).