

The Gavioli Organ, “Madam Laura,” on PBS

Vincent Astor

A segment of the show “Southern Routes” that aired in January and again (in longer form) in April of 2008 featured the 87-key Gavioli organ, *Madam Laura*, now being restored by Chris Carlisle of Sikeston, MO. The show is produced by PBS station WKNO in Memphis, TN. The organ was once part of the Paul and Laura Eakins collection (**Figure 1**) housed first at the Gay 90’s Village in Sikeston, Missouri; then at the Gay 90’s Melody Museum in St. Louis (**back cover photo**); and later at Bellm’s Cars and Music of Yesterday in Sarasota, FL. Chris is the grandson of Paul and Laura Eakins.



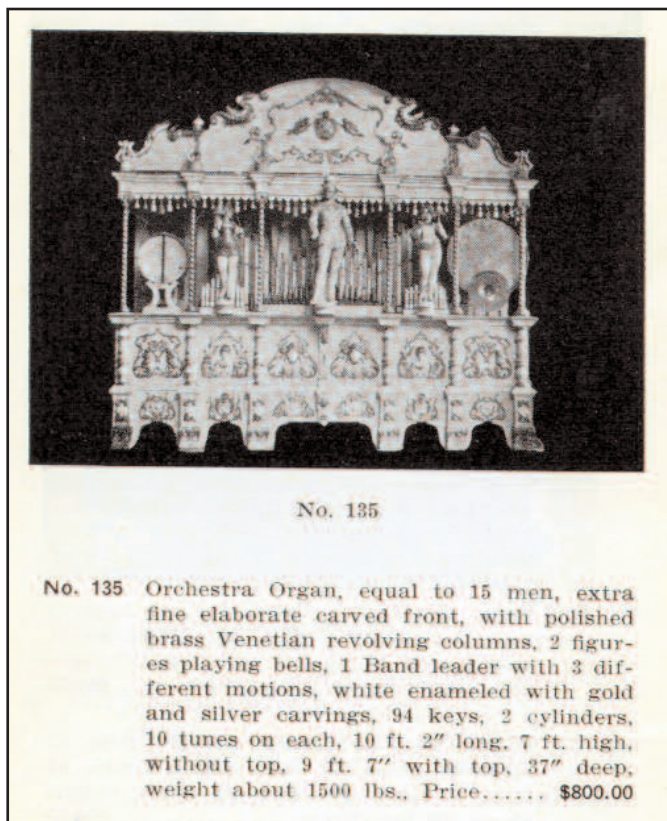
Figure 1. Paul Eakins poses with *Madam Laura*, a Muzzio/Gavioli organ of 87 keys. This photo was taken during the time the organ was at the Gay 90’s Village in Sikeston, MO. Photo: Chris Carlisle.

The storyline was written by myself, of Memphis, Tennessee, who remembered seeing this organ at the Mid-South Fair in Memphis in 1969 in the Gay 90’s Village exhibit. I corresponded with the Eakins family and kept track of the organ (my favorite) through all of its adventures. I began corresponding with Chris (**Figure 2**) after seeing his website (bandorganmusic.com) and we both began discussing a notice offering the organ for sale by a collector in North Carolina which included a long list of things wrong with the organ. Chris purchased the organ in 2004 and it returned to Sikeston where I visited it once again.

Co-producer of the segment was Debi Robertson, Program Manager of WKNO television, who saw the



Figure 2. The author (standing) and Chris Carlisle (seated) pose for the PBS shooting episode. Photo: Debi Robertson.



No. 135

No. 135 Orchestra Organ, equal to 15 men, extra fine elaborate carved front, with polished brass Venetian revolving columns, 2 figures playing bells, 1 Band leader with 3 different motions, white enameled with gold and silver carvings, 94 keys, 2 cylinders, 10 tunes on each, 10 ft. 2" long, 7 ft. high, without top, 9 ft. 7" with top, 37" deep, weight about 1500 lbs., Price..... \$800.00

Figure 3. An identical organ as *Madam Laura* is featured in a early 1900s Muzzio catalog. Photo: Fred Dahlinger.

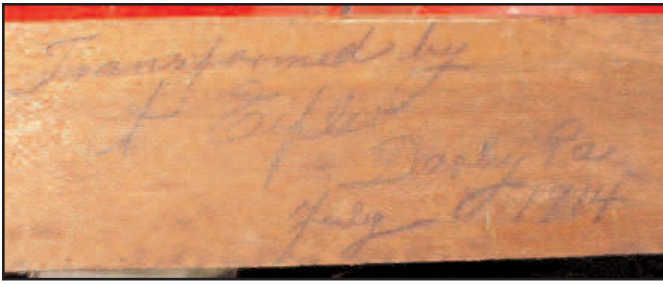


Figure 4. Writing inside of the organ: “Transformed by C. Eifler, Darby PA, July, 1914,” a date the organ was converted from cylinder use to book operation. Photo: Chris Carlisle.

organ on a trip with me in 2006. The shooting and interviews were completed in late October and included an interview with Ted Martin who was one of the painters who painted all of the Eakins organs in the 1960s.

Dates on papers found inside the organ in the 1960s have dated the 87-key organ to the late 1890s. It appears in a Muzzio catalogue (Figure 3) from the early 1900s but has many of the earmarks of the Gavioli firm (including the turning brass columns which disappeared when the organ went to storage in the fifties). It played on a carousel at Ramona



Figure 5. *Madam Laura* playing at Ramona Park in Grand Rapids sometime in the early 1950s. Note C. Eifler’s name on the facade. Photo: Chris Carlisle.

Park in Grand Rapids, MI, from 1909 until the rides were removed in 1955. It was converted from cylinder to book music in 1914 by C. Eifler (a signature and the date appear on the underside of the puff board). **Figures 4 & 5.** Paul Eakins purchased the organ in 1964 and his painters transformed it from its factory cream and gold leaf to a stunning brilliantly colored motif with the main body of the organ “valentine red” with intricate shading and much gold leaf. It is unique in having few reedy or diapason voices—more of the pipes being mostly flutes. It has snare drum, bass drum and cymbal, double castanets and three figures—a conductor with three movements and two bell ringers.

Two other unique facts are that it is one of two organs, both from the Eakins collection, with book music *Things Go Better With Coca-Cola*; and the conductor bears a resemblance to Laura Eakins (photos appeared in the PBS program) hence the organ’s name. More information and the short segment from the show may be found at bandorganmusic.com.

For more information on Paul Eakins’ organs see *Paul Eakins’ Gay 90s Organ Collection* in issue #4 of the *Carousel Organ*—ed

Since childhood, Vincent Astor has had a deep and abiding love for mechanical musical instruments—particularly band organs and especially, *Madam Laura*. It was Eakins recordings which fostered this love as well as a friendship with the Eakins and Carlisle families. He can also drive a Wurlitzer theater organ or a Wurlitzer Caliola with equal dexterity.

