

Organ Grinder Automata

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Of the many items to collect in the world of mechanical music, few are more exotic, nor more expensive, pound for pound, than automata. By definition, automata are defined as “The word Automaton is derived from the Greek *ἄ?οῦιάοῖο*,... *automatos*, “acting of one’s own will.” It is more often used to describe non-electronic moving machines, especially those that have been made to resemble human or animal actions, such as the jacks on old public striking clocks, or the cuckoo and any other animated figures on a cuckoo clock. While automata are considered to be a statement of the 19th century, in fact they were first created in their most rudimentary forms at least 5,000 years BC. They were, in today’s lexicon, the world’s first attempt to re-create the human form. At that time there were creative and complicated enough to actually play instruments such as the flute. The automata of that early era used water heated in various chambers to create differences in pressure and then forced into ventricles that created musical notations.

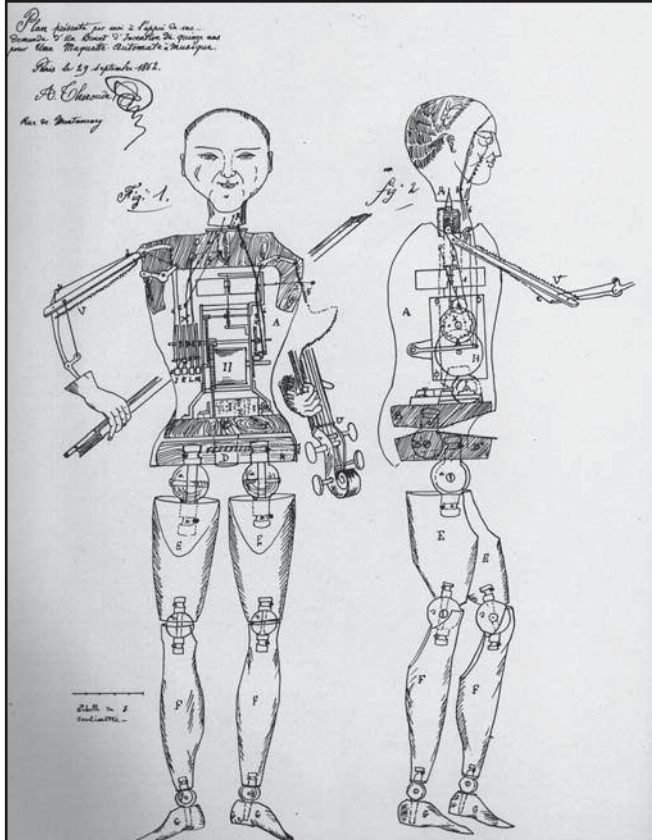


Figure 1. A schematic of a violinist automata. The spring motor is in the chest.

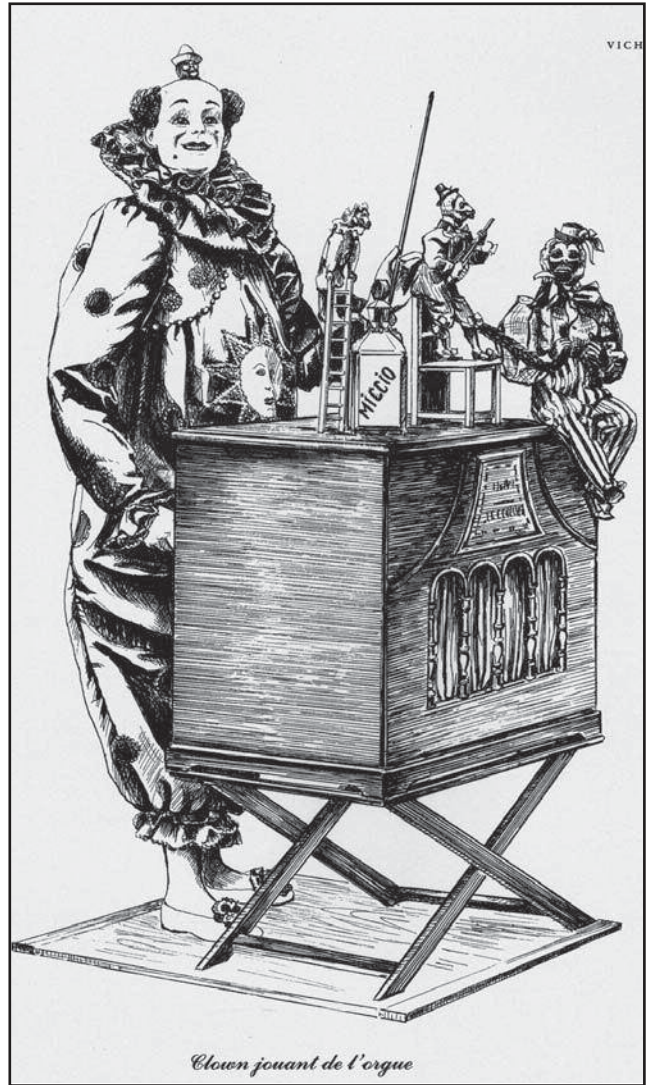


Figure 2. A masterpiece by Gustave Vichy. The figures on top of the organ are also automated. Vichy catalogue, ca. 1880.

The automata, or in many instances, toys, of the late 19th century were considered “toys for rich kids.” These complicated relics are highly desired for their great craftsmanship and sophisticated mechanisms. The automata of the golden age, 1850-1915, typically depicted everyday life and represented many of the crafts and lifestyles of the day. It’s no surprise that the esteemed craftsmen of the day (at that time women were not recognized for their considerable contributions). Most of the automatons of the Golden Era were made in France. Fortunately, France was the center universe of the world of automata at that time. In that era, knowing only those

who could possibly have afforded such pieces supported a cadre of artisans who were at the right place at the right time. Historically, it was on a scale, so to speak, of Michelangelo and his contemporaries being available to the Popes of the 16th century who created the masterpieces of the Renaissance.



Figure 3. Another Vichy from their catalogue, ca. 1880.

While tableaux, or pictures, as they are known today, were more or less “common” in their heyday, it was the automata in the human form that were the most impressive and desirable of the items that were the most wanted. As noted, the most popular of automata were those which depicted everyday life; such was the most popular of those pieces hand-crafted in the days of glory, as they are known.

The scarcity of these pieces is obvious considering they were made in very limited quantities and in some instances, i.e., from the more renowned of makers,



Figure 4. Vichy with dancing dolls, ca. 1880. It stands 23" tall and plays two tunes.

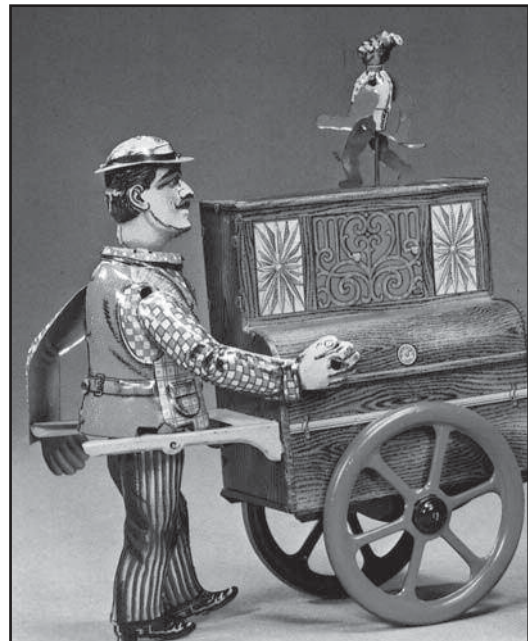


Figure 5. Tin toy, unmarked, ca. 1920s.

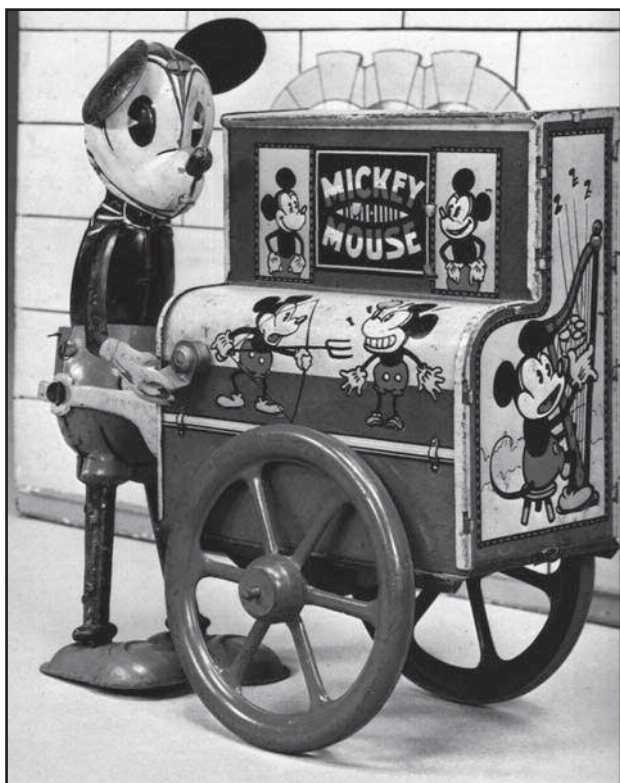


Figure 6. Perhaps the most classic of organ grinder toys: Mickey Mouse by the Marx toy company, ca. 1920s.

because they were made as limited edition pieces. While production numbers are not available, the literature is clear that automata were not made for the masses, especially considering their very dear retail prices. The highest-end pieces were sold for upwards of hundreds of dollars during the Victorian era; hardly for the faint of heart.



Figure 7. Jean Marie Philabois created this masterpiece ca. 1880. It stands 28" high.



Figure 8. Attributed to Jean Rouillet, ca 1890.

Some of the breathtaking automata were made by the greats of the day, including Vichy, Decamps and Lambert, among others. These and so many others are well illustrated in the masterpiece book on the subject: *Automata, The Golden Age, 1848-1915* by Christian Bailley, the ultimate resource in the field.



Figure 9. A very rare Bruder crank barrel organ with automata.



Figure 10. A close-up of the Bruder automata.

Of special interest to our readers in this article are the pieces depicting the ubiquitous organ grinder. In today's perspective, it's almost impossible to imagine what a legendary role the grinder played, literally, on the streets of America during the 18th-early 20th centuries. Perhaps it is because of the unique instrument, requiring little or no talent to produce music; perhaps because of the stereotypical character playing the machine; or maybe because of the typically happy music that was produced. Whatever the reasons, there's no doubt the organ grinder made his (or



Figure 11. An unique American tableaux featuring Abe Lincoln performing for a group of children. The arm and monkeys are animated. It measures 26" x 20", ca 1860s.

her) place in history bringing music to the masses prior to the advent of the phonograph, radio, and the myriad of devices since to provide music as conveniently and economically as we've come to know and expect.

To make the point of the importance of this character, the photos in this article are proof positive of the significance of the organ grinder in America, and throughout the western world. Remembering the scarcity and incredible price point of these items, it goes without saying that they wouldn't

have been made unless there was a market for them. And that market, then and now, was aimed at the highest end consumers, who had and have the financial resources to afford only the finest of such masterpieces of ingenuity, craftsmanship and object d'art.



Figure 12. The author with a limited edition Franz Oehrlein folded cardboard pipe organ. Circa 1985, both characters.

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All books are out of print.

Angelo is retired after careers in criminal justice, editing and real estate. He now enjoys extensive travel here and overseas and attending COAA organ rallies.



