

Remembering Band and Dance Organs

Q. David Bowers

My congratulations to Ron Bopp and the Carousel Organ Association of America on issuing its 50th issue. This group certainly has been one of the most dynamic of the various niche or specialized societies. Here's wishing everyone many more years of continued success.

My early experiences with band organs have to do with riding on carousels, including in Glen Echo Park when as a young elementary school student I lived in Baltimore, Maryland. Today the Wurlitzer Style 165 organ at the park, carefully restored and tended to by Durward Center, is more of an attraction than ever.

In 1960 I discovered the world of automatic musical instruments by purchasing a little Regina music box playing an 11-inch disc. The price was \$125, including a pile of shiny discs separated by old newspaper sheets. I thought this was the greatest bargain ever as here was an antique that not only looked interesting but entertained and performed! The rest is history, as you may know. I went on to collect automatic musical instruments of all kinds, and to write extensively about them, including the 1982 *Encyclopedia of Automatic Musical Instruments*, of which some were between 20,000 and 30,000 have been sold worldwide. This was published in the days that the Vestal Press was central to the hobby and issued original works, reprints, and other publications that reached a wide

circle. Today we have no equivalent of the Vestal Press, which is unfortunate. Perhaps the internet makes up for it to a degree, but only slightly so. There is something nice about having a central publishing house regularly issue new titles. Perhaps someone should step up to the opportunity.

In the early 1960s I lived in Vestal, New York, not far from the home of Harvey and Marion Roehl. In their collection they had a Wurlitzer Style 146A band organ (**Figure 1**) that had been installed in one of four local amusement parks that had been financed by the Johnson family, owners of the Endicott-Johnson shoe factories, but which had been silent for many years. Someone contacted Harvey and asked if he was interested. He went to see it, was told in exchange for \$25 he could haul it away. This was an era in which there was not much interest in rebuilding or preserving such instruments. Upon taking it home he found that a hose had slipped off of a connection. Putting it back on, the organ played wonderfully!

This anecdote reminds me of something similar when in 1984 I visited Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. I went to visit the carousel and saw an attractive Wurlitzer Style 153 organ at the center, but it did not play. I asked the attendant if I could look at it and he replied in the affirmative. I poked around and found that a hose had been disconnected, attached it, and it played as well as ever.

In 1967 with Terry Hathaway I formed Hathaway & Bowers in Santa Fe Springs, California. We started in a small way, and endeavored to build an inventory of instruments of all kinds—ranging from disc and cylinder music boxes to organettes, coin operated pianos, orchestrions, band organs, and along the way various antique coin operated arcade machines and the like. Success attended our efforts, and before long we moved into a new 10,000 square-foot building. This became a great attraction, and people came to see us from all over the world. Hathaway & Bowers was profitable from the start, much to the amazement of some onlookers. As the business was getting underway, my fine friend, Mrs. Ruth Bornand, the well known music box dealer in Pelham, NY, cautioned me to take great care, saying that the business of collecting automatic musical instruments was so small that it would not sustain much in the way in overhead and expenses. However, somehow all turned out well.

More than just a few collectors began by visiting H&B, including J.B. Nethercutt, whose legacy lives on today with the San Sylmar Museum, and Siegfried Wendel whose museum in Rüdeshheim, Germany is one of that country's major tourist attractions. In time, H&B closed down, as I moved from the Santa Fe Springs area. I became associated with Claes O. Friberg and established



Figure 1. Harvey Roehl's Wurlitzer 146A.
Photo: Roehl's *Keys to a Musical Past*



Figure 2. The *Taj Mahal*, a 101-key Mortier dance organ once featured in the American International Galleries, Irvine, California.

the Mekanisk Musik Museum in Copenhagen, which through the early 1980s was a prime tourist attraction in that Danish city. In the mid-1970s with Bonnie Tekstra I formed American International Galleries, in Irvine, California, which replicated the former Hathaway & Bowers and offered a great showroom full of instruments. The main attraction was the *Taj Mahal* dance organ (Figure 2) All of this activity spawned many hundreds of collectors. In 1979 the membership of the Musical Box

Society International was close to 3,000, and the newer (formed in 1963) Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors Association, or AMICA, was growing by leaps and bounds.

Along the way I, Terry Hathaway, Claes Friberg, and Bonnie Tekstra had the chance to buy and sell many different band organs and dance organs. In the Wurlitzer series we had everything from the smallest models through an example of the Style 180 (now owned by Alan Bies and Steve Boehck of Houston), Figure 2. Most popular were models such as the 125, 146 (and variations), 150 and 153 (in particular). We handled one example of the Style 157 and over a period of time, three of the Style 165, one of which had done duty at Playland at the Beach in San

Francisco. I bought it from Mike Roberts, of Berkeley, the owner of a very successful postcard issuing business. Figure 3.



Figure 3. A Wurlitzer Style 180 in the collection of Alan Bies and Steve Boehck of Houston. Photo: Ron Bopp



Figure 4. Wurlitzer band organ styles 18, 125, 150 and 165 as advertised in a 1914 catalog.

Related instruments such as the Tangley CA-43 calliope were acquired now and again, but always sold quickly. Band organs were in the fast lane, and it is probably true that most of them passed through our hands without ever staying long enough to be described in one of our catalogues. We never did have a 53-note National calliope in stock, but in the early 1980s I acquired one personally, which in the following years was a great attraction. In 1999 the Republican Committee of New Hampshire asked me if I would use it to lead the very first parade held by George W. Bush, recently announced as a presidential candidate. This was done in a procession that went through the towns of Milford and Amherst in New Hampshire, playing to crowds. Afterward, George Bush had a private picnic. He asked me if he were elected would I have the calliope come to Washington for his inaugural parade. I agreed, but I never heard anything further from him.

Apart from Wurlitzer band organs, we had our share of Ruth (topped by a Style 38), Bruder, Gavioli, Limonaire (never plentiful, but always interesting when they came to hand), and other instruments. In Copenhagen Claes O. Friberg had over a dozen hand-cranked “monkey organs,” some of which he would rent out. It was a Danish tradition in the 1970s, and perhaps still is today, that to celebrate a wedding anniversary or past event a hand-cranked organ would be hired, to be played in front of the celebrants’ home at six in the morning!



Figure 5. A Gebrüder Bruder circa 1914 catalog illustration of the Military Symphony Orchestra Selection.



Figure 6. The Bruder *Selection* now in the Deutsches Musikautomatenmuseum in Bruchsal, Germany.

You can imagine my delight and surprise when Jim Carroll, a Chicago dealer in automatic musical instruments, told me he had for sale the largest and most expensive of the Gebrüder Bruder organs, the *Selection*. This was originally used in Coney Island and may have been the only such instrument ever made. I bought from him the main part of the instrument and from Howard Hynne some decorative parts he had kept when he sold it to Carroll. The late Mike Kitner did the restoration, and it was set up in my music room. Still to be done were the mechanical figures on the front. Some new music was arranged. The restoration was superb, but having an organ intended for a large Coney Island carousel in my music room was simply too overwhelming volume-wise (Figures 5 & 6).

Jan Brauers, who was building a museum in Bruchsal, near Heidelberg, came to visit. The German government was sponsoring the museum in an enlightened scenario that would be wonderful to have in America. We struck a deal, he bought it for the museum, and I inquired as to shipping. “I’ll have Lufthansa arrange to pick it up and fly it to Frankfurt,” he said. I remonstrated that as the organ was immense and weighed thousands of pounds this might be costly. “No matter, Germany owns Lufthansa!” he replied. The rest is history, and today it is a prime attraction in Bruchsal in the Deutsches Musikautomatenmuseum.

In the early 1960s I received a call from the Humphrey Company in Cleveland, Ohio, the owners of Euclid Beach Park. They were closing down and won-

dered if I could make a suggestion as to anyone who might be interested in the 110-key Gavioli organ that had long been a fixture in the skating rink (Figure 7) The price was asked was \$13,000. I had no room for it myself, but after some discussion was able to place it with Dr. Robert Miller, a Connecticut collector, who set it up in an out building near his home, where it was enjoyed by many enthusiasts, including members of the Music Box Society International. Later it went into the collection of Tim Trager, where it remains today.



Figure 7. The 110-Gavioli concert organ as it sat and played at Euclid Beach Park. Photo: Humphrey Company

Dance organs by Mortier and Decap so popular now, were virtually unknown in America in the late 1960s when Hathaway & Bowers introduced them. This was done in a grand way after I visited Arthur Bursens in Antwerp, Belgium. The maker of Arburo dance organs, Bursens had several dozen instruments in his warehouse that had earlier been in various locations in Belgium and

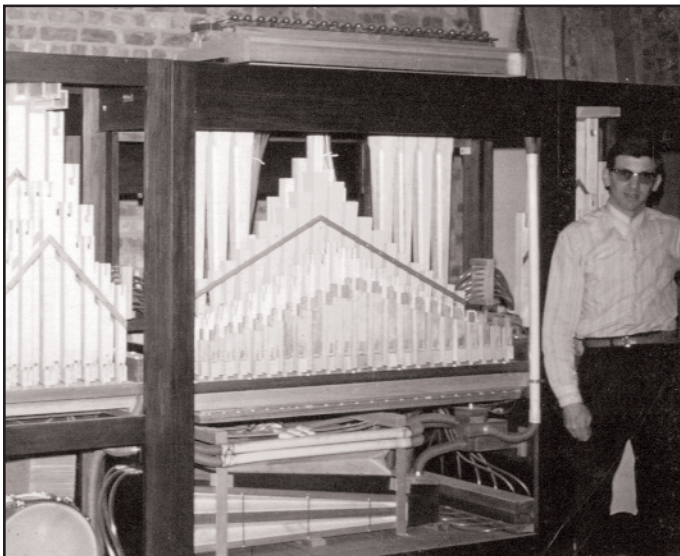


Figure 8. Arthur Prinsen poses with a Bursens organ (sans façade).

Holland. Now, the public interest in them had faded, he did not know what to do with a warehouse full! With Arthur Prinsen assisting, I arranged to buy all of them, to be shipped to our warehouse in Santa Fe Springs (Figure 8).

A demonstration model was set up, recording was made, and advertisements placed. Terry Hathaway and I had no clue whether they would lay an egg or whether they would sell. Our fears proved to be unfounded, as the demonstration model sold, then another, and then another, and before long all were gone! Today as you read these words, any buyer of an Arburo orchestrion has seen the value multiply several times and the interest expand to create attention whenever one is demonstrated (Figure 9).

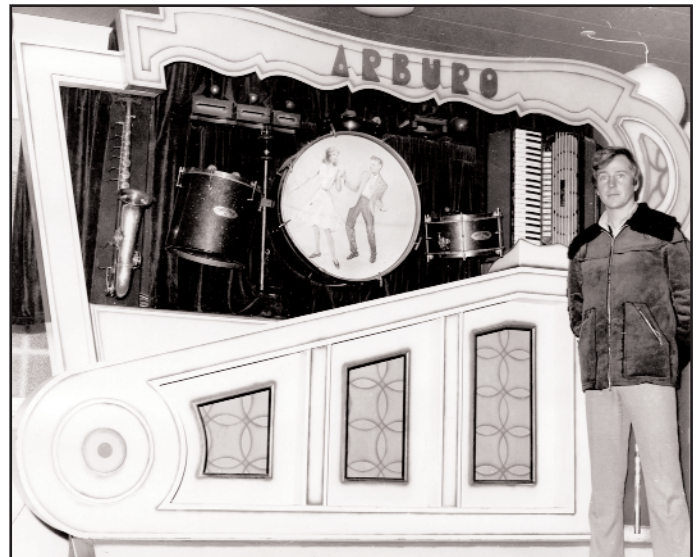


Figure 9. An original caption for this photo: "A large Arburo dance organ features an extensive display of visible instruments on the front. Claes O. Friberg is shown standing in front. In the late 1960s the firm of Hathaway & Bowers purchased 49 Arburo and Ideal dance organs from Arthur Bursens, who earlier had operated them in various commercial locations. A detailed brochure was prepared to offer these to collectors but before it could be published word and spread and most were sold!" Source: *Treasures of Mechanical Music*

Back in the mid 1960s there were several large dance halls in Belgium that displayed immense Decap dance organs, typically with an accordion, several drums, saxophone, and other gadgets displayed on the façade, illuminated by colored lights. Examples of these were available for sale, usually inexpensively, say \$500 to \$1,500 but Terry and I did not envision that anyone would be interested in America; a typical dance organ would occupy most of the interior of a 40-foot container, with the result that we did not import these. Opportunities were lost, especially when viewed in hindsight, for today these impressive instruments are showpieces in a number of American collections. The products of Théophile Mortier, famous Antwerp organ builder, were older and more

ornate in appearance, and we imported a fair number of these, ranging from the immense Taj Mahal down to perhaps close to a dozen Mortier orchestrions. The last were called such (not organs), had ornate wooden fronts, and played folding cardboard music books. When restored these were very listenable, as they remain today. Last summer I had the chance to enjoy one, tagged *Astrid*, in the Jasper Sanfilippo Collection (see [back page](#)).

I should note that in America and in Europe, band organs never completely

fell out of favor when other pneumatic instruments lost their popularity in the 1930s. There was a time from then to the 1950s when coin operated pianos and orchestrions, Violano-Virtuoso violin playing machines, reproducing pianos, organettes and the like, were very inexpensive, as relatively few people collected them. However, band organs remaining in service in carousels were always appreciated, and never sold for pennies on the dollar. For me and my associates in the 1960s and 1970s acquiring them was always a challenge, one at a time, and never inexpensively. In Europe they were even more highly prized as were Dutch street organs. As noted, dance organs were the exception, as these were out of use (except for a few large Decap instruments) and were stored in warehouses.

In the 1960s in several trips to Waldkirch, Germany, I always drove to 28 Kandelstrasse and paid a call on Carl Frei, Jr., who was as busy as ever repairing band organs. I say “repairing,” for owners never wanted to pay for what collectors would call a full 100-point restoration. The

Kring van Draiorgelvrienden (Circle of Friends of the Hand-Cranked Street Organ) was active then, and its members were good

customers of Frei. In his shop he had a Weber *Otero* orchestrion set up and in playing condition, but was not particularly fond of it or other automatic pianos and orchestrions. He told me that at the Felsenkeller, a Waldkirch pub, there was a Weber *Styria* in use. I went to see it and heard it play, albeit feebly. Later I was told that the pub was destroyed by fire. At the time there was zero interest



Figure 10. A 92-key Verbeeck street organ (*Marian*) now in the Sanfilippo collection.

Photo: Ron Bopp

in Weber and related orchestrions. Eugene DeRoy, who had been in the roll-perforating business for many years with “Symphonion,” used his book with old addresses to squire me around Germany and other places—and in the process we captured quite a few Hupfeld, Weber, Popper, and other orchestrions, but not a single large band organ.

Today as you read these words, the supply of band organs and dance organs is widely dispersed. To the originals have been added a number of new models including copies of old Wurlitzer and other designs, not to overlook a grand series of completely new instruments, offered as such, by Johnny Verbeeck of Belgium (**Figure 10.**) and Don Stinson of Bellefontaine, Ohio.

Band organs live on, as brightly as ever!

All photographs submitted by the author except where otherwise noted.

Dave Bowers discovered the world of automatic musical instruments in 1960 and, as related in this article, went on to engage in research in America and Europe, be a principal in Hathaway & Bowers, American International Galleries, and the Mekanisk Musik Museum. He has written many articles and several books, including the 1,008 page *Encyclopedia of Automatic Musical Instruments*, which is a standard reference. Dave advises that a book on violin-playing machines and also *The Encyclopedia of Disc Music Boxes* will be forthcoming from the Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors Association (AMICA), and that with Art Reblitz he is working on a large reference book about American orchestrions, coin-operated pianos and related instruments. He can be reached at qdbarchive@metrocast.net

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