

Twelfth International Drehorgelfest Thun 2001

Tom Griffith

Now, almost 250 small mechanical organs on the streets at one time; this has to be Thun. Indeed it is. It is the Twelfth International Drehorgelfest held in Thun, Switzerland, every two years. This last year it was held on the 14th and 15th of July. The Thun festival is recognized unarguably as the outstanding small organ festival in Europe and is attended by drehorgelspieler from throughout Europe.



Figure 1. A quartet of “old” organ grinders after a long day of grinding.

Thun, otherwise known as “The City of the Alps” is in itself an interesting city located east of Bern at the foot of the Alps on the shore of Thunersee. Thun is replete with historical buildings, picturesque alleys in the old town and well-known museums including one dedicated to mechanical musical instruments that has many unusual and interesting antiques in its collection. But, among organ grinders Thun the site of “The Festival” is mecca.

The Thun festival presents a great diversity of mechanical musical instruments with respect to age, builder and presentation. The instruments included many of the ubiquitous Raffins along with

Figure 3. COAA member Hal O’Rourk trying his hand at playing one of the Thun organs.



Stubers and a few Bacigalupos accompanied by their Bruns and Hofbauer replicas. With the exception of a few special presentations, grinders were expected to change location every 20 minutes to half-hour. There were several Moritoten presentations sprinkled among the grinders as were several ladies serenading the crowd accompanied by their small cranked Ariston reed organs. One organ was mounted on a wagon, drawn by a donkey, much in the way organ

grinders traveled from town to town in the latter part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th (Figure 2). It is even alleged a 1906 56-key Gebrüder Bruder Carousel Organ was hiding somewhere in a dark alley out of the mainstream of activity. Almost without exception the organ grinders and those accompanying them were dressed in period costumes which added a lot to the overall environment of the festival.



Figure 2. A donkey-drawn organ and wagon.



Figure 4. Josef Raffin with his friend, Stephan Suter and Ulrich Suter (Stephan's son) playing a trio and joined by clown Ueli (a show stopper at Thun).

One of the principal feature presentations was that of Josef Raffin who with his friend Stephan Suter and Stephan's son Ulrich played as a trio throughout the festival (Figure 4). This group continually drew a sizeable crowd throughout the festival but especially so when joined by clown, Ueli Habegger of Thun, who provided percussion accompaniment with a steel brush on the lid of a garbage can. At those times a particular percussive emphasis was required he would raise and lower the hinged lid of the can and stomp his foot. Ueli, a local favorite, ranged throughout the entire festival venue via his bicycle, garbage can carried on the back, joining individual grinders and groups alike to practice his unusual bit of musicianship.

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Figure 6. What organ festival is complete without a puppeteer?



Figure 5. De Biermann, a Dutch (Limonaire) street organ and a 45er Bruns Trumpetenorgel owned by Peter and Jeannette Biermann.

For anyone wanting to become totally immersed in a diverse world of small mechanical organs in a very short time, the Thun Drehorgelfest is indeed a must. The next festival will be held during the summer of 2003. I plan on being there. How about you?

Tom Griffith is an Emeritus Professor and Mechanical Engineer now retired from a professional career that took him worldwide. He is a COAA member living in Hays, Kansas, where he collects European street organs playing them at local events throughout western Kansas; and, has built his own 31 note street organ.