

Resurrection of the Heller Gavioli

By
Herb Brabandt

This is the story of a large, dilapidated Gavioli fair organ from discovery to completed restoration. It chronicles the rescue, acquisition, initial restoration efforts, description of organ, its history and some interesting discoveries, along with the final major restoration efforts and a happy ending.

Finding, Acquiring and Restoring

The organ was found sometime in the late 60's, which was the earlier period of my organ collecting pursuits. When I first heard the story (almost like a legend amongst collectors – the elusive “Heller Hoard”) it was rumored that an old gentleman by the name of Erwin Heller had a barn “full” of fair and band organs somewhere in Ohio, and that some of them were amongst the largest made with exquisitely carved facades. I had always wanted a large fair organ but when an 89 key(less) Carl Frei Fair Organ became available, I managed to acquire it and the “legend” of the “Heller Hoard” faded into obscurity (at least for the time being).

Several years later it was learned that a gentleman living in Canada had acquired several large organs from the Heller collection. He did not want to sell them when initially approached, but several years later after viewing photos of one of the organs, realizing its potential, and learning that it might be for sale, travel was arranged to determine the possibility of acquisition. The organ was in wretched condition: it had been stored in a leaky barn for quite some time, and then was moved to a semi-trailer (Fig. 1).



Fig. 2 One of four carvings with inset paintings present on the façade.



Fig. 1 The 87/89 key Gavioli as it was presented in Erwin Heller's trailer in the 1960s.

Most of the bottom pipes were in pieces, the case was broken and rotted, there was no usable key-frame, there were splits in the wind chest, and generally the organ was in sad shape. But, the facade was magnificent – all the carvings in excellent condition (Fig. 2) and I knew it would be a magnificent instrument when properly restored. The organ was carefully dismantled and brought home. Many of the pipes were just pieces and it took quite some time to piece everything together much like a giant jigsaw puzzle (Fig. 3). Construction was started on a new main case as a solid and sound case is fundamental to the timbre of an organ. The huge pump was sent to Durward Center for a complete rebuild and returned looking as though it was brand new out of the factory workshop.

Fig. 3 A view of the mangled pipework.



The Gavioli sat dormant for many years and it soon became apparent it was no longer a practical project for me to complete, so the organ was offered for sale. Not being able to persuade anyone in the U.S. to tackle this project, I knew that Andrew Pilmer in England recognized the organ's potential. After an exchange of photos and discussions, Andrew was commissioned by Brian Wells of Banbury to acquire the organ. Arrangements were made for a shipping container and Andrew flew in to oversee the packing in late 1997. It took several days of careful attention to load the container and the organ was en route to its new home.



Fig. 5 A similar organ to the one described in this article is the Herbert Slack organ formerly in the Darley Dale museum.

As to the organ’s history: logo stamps of Charles van der Mueren of Anvers were found on several of the pipe risers (Fig. 6), so we know the organ passed through his shop before coming to the U.S. The earliest date indicator found was on a hidden certificate issued by the New York Board of Fire Underwriters (Fig. 7). This was issued sometime between 1900 and 1909 where the organ played “outside” at the premises of M. Scherrel at 196th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. The certificate stated the organ was certified to use a “20 H.P. motor.”



Fig. 6 The Charles van der Mueren Stamp (Anvers) found several places.

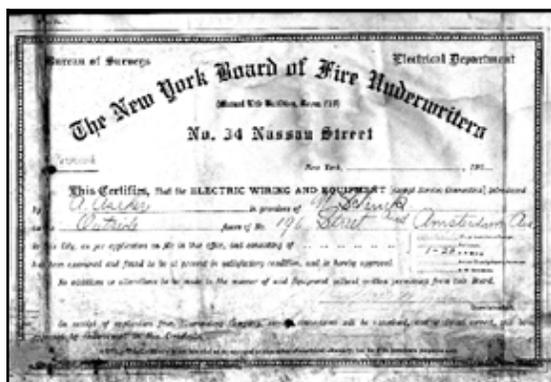


Fig. 7 The New York Board of Fire Underwriters certificate.

The organ appears in a Smithsonian archive photo (Fig 8) taken in 1907 on the Philadelphia Toboggan Company carousel number 15. This was a four abreast carousel which must have been a spectacle to behold with this organ as the musical source. Speculation is the organ went to the Berni Factory for conversion and preparation and then to the carousel. The water is somewhat muddied by a label found when the pump was re-built by D. Center (Fig 9). It reads L. Bacigalupo, 244 Ainslie Street, Brooklyn, NY, is dated October 27, 1913, and signed by L. Bacigalupo and Tony Crescio. My guess is this is when the organ was converted to the roll system as their business produced numerous roll conversions. I understand the organ was removed from the carousel in 1923 and this is possibly when it was acquired by Mr. Heller.



Fig. 8. The 87/89 key Gavioli on location with the PTC #15 carousel after the turn-of-the-century.



Figure 9 L. Bacigalupo and Tony Crescio's signature decal found on the pump.

Back to the Restoration

Brian Wells received the organ in November of 1997, and immediately went to work on the restoration. It was decided to make a new wind chest (an exact duplicate of the original). He engaged the services of well-known restorer, Andrew Whitehead and it was decided to operate the organ using the 89 key VB scale. This was probably the original scale of the organ and certainly the most popular 89 key scale in

the U.K. A new keyframe was built, the case was finished, pipes re-glued and re-made in some cases, baritone register added, and the monumental task of stripping the paints to their original colors was done by Brian's wife, Christine.

The paintings were especially delicate and delightfully detailed figural and ballroom dance scenes. Christine, who is an accomplished artist, along with one of her daughters, did a masterful job and could be seen doing some of this work at the Great Dorset Steam Fair in 1998 where the organ appeared in its unfinished condition.

The Happy Ending

In June of 1999, the Black Forest town of Waldkirch in southern Germany held an "all out" bicentennial celebration to commemorate 200 years of organ building in Waldkirch. Brian and Christine decided to travel the 622 miles (one-way) to share their treasure and handiwork at this world organ event. It was there we met with Brian and Christine and had the opportunity to see and hear the Gavioli (Fig. 10). It sounded just as I had imagined, had traveled extremely well, and the restoration was absolutely first class.



Fig. 10 The Heller-Brabandt-Wells' Gavioli as it appeared at the Waldkirch Orgenfest in June, 1999. The complete restoration was well worth the time and effort as it commanded large crowds on the main avenue of downtown Waldkirch.

The Gavioli could not possibly have ended up in a better place with any better caretakers. The organ is destined to travel to many of the rallies in England and is sure to become a regular at the annual Great Dorset Steam Fair. Brian plans to have a commercial recording available in the spring of 2000 and I'm sure it will be well received.

Herb Brabandt and his wife, Jo Ann, live in Louisville, KY, and have collected fair organs for many years.