

The Very First Time

by
Tom McAuley

... September 1995.
... Discovered mechanical organs.
... A new adventure begins.

While I grew up in a fairly musical family, my experiences with musical instruments were limited to the common band instruments that seem to take considerable skill and practice to play well. I had seen the occasional player piano and had read the term “organ grinder” in stories, but I was not really familiar with those types of instruments. I thought that nickelodeons had long been extinct, and that carousels had always used recorded music. So you can imagine my surprise and delight when I walked onto the Kansas State Fairgrounds one day and found all kinds of mechanical pipe organs on display. There were big ones and little ones, loud ones and soft ones, fancy ones and plain ones. I found small ones that the owners called “monkey organs” on little push carts and big ones called “band organs” in trailers. I even found a calliope in a truck. They were scattered throughout the fairgrounds, so almost everywhere I went, I found another organ.

I was fascinated with the discovery that fine organ music could be produced by anyone capable of turning a crank at a consistent rate. I was awed by the beautiful designs, the carvings, and the paintings that covered these wonderful machines. I was entranced by the variety of music these instruments were playing, from waltzes to marches to show-tunes. But best of all, I was welcomed into the circle—encouraged to ask questions and take a turn at cranking out a tune.

The mechanical aspects of the organs were truly fascinating to me. I looked and watched and questioned, and eventually began to understand how they worked. The idea that a few holes punched into a strip of paper could actually make a pipe organ play seemed awfully clever to me. And I was quite intrigued that just turning that one crank could bring the whole instrument to life. I had a great time watching as the crank turned, and the bellows pumped, and the paper moved, and the organ produced its wonderful music.

The artistry of the designs on the fronts of the organs was outstanding. I learned that the organs had been hand-crafted in England, or Belgium, or Germany and each one was unique. A small red one featured paintings about Mozart, while a big shiny black one had scenes of Germany and portraits of composers painted on the front. I saw one that was decorated like a circus, with animated clowns ringing the bells, and I saw others with very elaborate gold-leaf carvings, and still others with exquisite inlaid wood. Some of the organs were very simple, while others were just overwhelming celebrations of the wood-carvers art. Each of the organs was beautiful in its own way, and it was interesting to see how some of the owners even dressed in appropriate costumes to match the theme of their organs.

Music, music, music! A wonderful variety of tunes was being played. I heard classical waltzes, and medleys of Broadway musicals, drinking songs, children's favorites, dance numbers, and marches. The music was just so cheerful, I felt like I could listen for hours. I also realized that each organ had a unique tone. Some had a very mellow sound, while others had a brighter tone. As I explored the various organs scattered throughout the fairgrounds, I discovered that some used a paper roll, some used a cardboard book, and some used a microprocessor to control the organ. The big organs were producing a full, rich



Tom McAuley eagerly playing “The Happiest Music on Earth.”

sound with more than one hundred pipes, and the smaller ones played light melodies with as few as twenty pipes.

Many times I have attended festivals or events where the exhibitors ignored the crowds or acted as if they were completely bored. Not this time! All the organ grinders had smiles on their faces. They were encouraging the crowd to not only stop and listen, but also to sing and dance along with the music. The theme seemed to be “The Happiest Music on Earth” and they certainly believed it. Their enthusiasm was contagious, and most of the crowd quickly entered into the spirit of the occasion by singing along, or clapping, or just smiling and nodding in time to the music. When somebody, like me, seemed especially interested or asked a question, the answers came quickly and cheerfully. More serious interest was rewarded with an invitation to look inside the organ to see how it all worked, or an opportunity to crank out a tune.

I hung around so long that one of the organ grinders finally insisted I take over his organ while he went to look at the other exhibits at the fair. I had a fabulous time playing his organ! He told me I could choose any rolls I wanted, and he had shown me how to change them, so I took my turn playing anything I liked. Of course, the other grinders let me play their organs, too, so I got to play several songs on several different sizes and types of organs. I even received a certificate proclaiming my new accomplishments!

That was a very, very special weekend for me. I discovered a whole new world that I had not even known existed before. I have since joined a couple of organizations and met a lot of really nice people. I have begun the process of learning about these fascinating instruments. I'm learning about their history, how they are built, and how they have been used through the years. I'm beginning to learn the names and the models. And, I'm discovering that these organs, both big and small, are tucked away in all types of little corners of the world—I just have to listen and look to keep finding them. I've even purchased my own little monkey organ. Now I'm one of those cheerful people bringing the “Happiest Music on Earth” to the crowds at fairs and festivals, and I'm still having a wonderful time!

Tom McAuley is a newer member of the Heart of America Chapter of AMICA and attends all the local rallies that he can. His enthusiasm is refreshing and contagious.