

## Barrel Organs (or Street Organs) in Cuba\*

Raymond Messelier

During a festival of mechanical music in the summer of 2001, Arnaud Moyencourt recalled barrel organs situated in a part of the world quite far from our region—South America. I remembered then a series of articles on Cuban organs that appeared in the journal *Het Pierement*, a journal of the Kring Van Draaiorgelvrienden, which is in fact the equivalent of A.I.M.M. in the Netherlands. I want to thank them for their kind authorization to use their resources.

I was, after all, quite surprised to establish that already in 1989 this subject had been treated, and that at least seven articles, some shorter than others, had been dedicated to it. Therefore, I didn't hesitate to reread them, in order to be able to present to you the most complete summary possible (after translating articles in Dutch) on this subject.

Our friend, Bernard Beaufriere, having himself had the opportunity to visit Cuba recently, gave us permission to reproduce illustrations and some photos that illustrate perfectly this article. I wish to thank him for this.

Situated in Central America, Cuba is well-known for the famous Fidel Castro, and for beautiful American cars of the 1950s that are found there . . . but, besides that, there are organs and, what organs!

### Origin And History Of The Cuban Barrel/Street Organ:

First of all, let us consider the origin of these organs in Cuba. It is a commonly accepted fact that before 1900, there were already organs, imported from France, present in the region of Manzanillo. These instruments were used to enliven local festivities and played dances and songs (different forms of Cuban music). The first were barrel organs, which were followed quickly by perforated-card (*book-Ed*) organs.

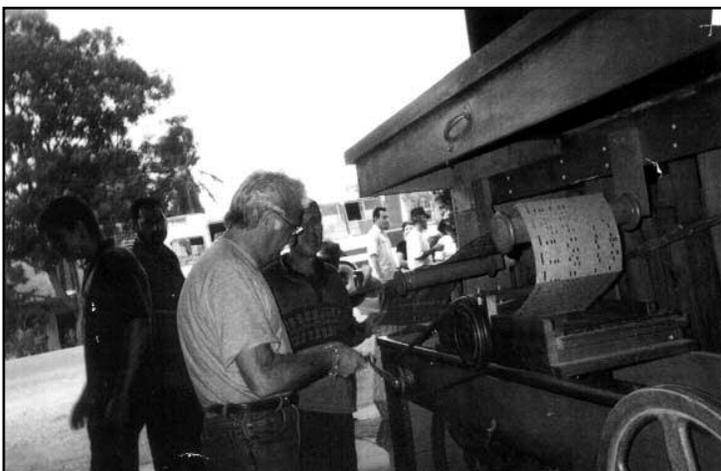


Figure 1. The book is cranked through the organ and then back to its box.

The first organ came from Cienfuegos, in the center of Cuba. French people residing in La Perla del Sul had imported this instrument. The two Cubans who are at the origin of the organ business are Fornaris and Borbolla. First friends, then rivals—one does not know which came first but let's leave this historical argument aside.

\*Translated from French to English by Gina Rulli

Manzanillo was a port, quite prosperous, in the east of Cuba. Boats stopped there to load salted meat, fruit and wood. The wood business was very good there and gave the area constant activity. It is thus that in the second part of the 19th century, a mulatto, Santiago Fornaris Jerez came to Manzanillo to look for work. He found a job in the wood sector and made the acquaintance of a friend who spoke to him one day of a “funny wooden instrument” which he had seen for the first time in Cienfuegos. It was described “like a big wooden case that played music like an orchestra and which was operated by turning a crank.”



Figure 2. Testing the pipes.

This obsessed Fornaris, who was a dancer, and as soon as he had saved enough he went to buy a “musical box” which was nothing other than an organ. According to historical research done there, it seems, therefore, that the first instruments were barrel organs, which were rapidly replaced by perforated card organs. Organs were already mentioned in official documents in 1876.

The first organs were of French origin and Gayetana Panza and Rafeal Hidalgo made a business of them. A little after, a certain Francisco (Pancho) Bordolla, encouraged by the success of his friend, Fornaris, also acquired some.



Figure 3. Cranking an organ while a real drummer plays to the left.

In Cuba, dance and music are very important, and from 1900 Pancho Bordolla made his first trip to France, where he visited the International Exposition in Paris. The Limonaire Freres factory, with which he was already in correspondence, was showing its brand new organ, functioning with perforated cards. At that time he bought an instrument with 49 keys, along with a selection of music. That signified the end of the barrel



Figure 4. A Cuban mechanical organ, with accompaniment of traditional Cuban musicians.

organs, which were resold in the most remote places in Cuba.

Then, the expansion of business was such that Pancho Bordolla sent his oldest son, Panchito, to Paris to learn the technique of organs. Panchito stayed four years in the factories of Limonaire and Poirot. After that

it was the turn of Pancho's youngest son, Carlos, to go to Paris. The two brothers were then able to construct and repair the instruments, as well as creating the perforated cards.

Just the opposite, the descendants of Santiago Fornaris did something different: they called upon their experience where they were located to construct four instruments respectively, Radio Uno, Radio Dos, El Neuvo Sonido and Isla de Cuba.

As a side note some say that the organs permitted arms trafficking during the troubled periods of the revolutions. Others say that the first organs arrived in Cuba filled with jewels coming from France. But, who knows what is the truth and what is fiction?

#### Use And Adaptation Of The Cuban Organ:

There are a number of marked differences which appear in the use of the Cuban organ:

- a. Absence of a façade: the organs are presented like big “cases” without embellishments or decorations.
- b. Hand registers are placed on the left and right of the instrument.
- c. Two separate drive wheels are present—one for advancing the perforated cardboard and the other for air production.

[Differences “b” and “c” means that the organ must be operated by four person: one for the advancement of the cardboard, one for the air production and two for the management of the registers (example: seven registers or stops on one side and nine on the other).]

- d. The organ has no percussion. A musical group comes to complement the organ (or is it that the organ comes to complement the musical group?).
- e. Since the pieces of music are quite long, the problem of (repetition—Ed) has been resolved in an original manner: the perforated cardboard is in fact “closed.” It is glued in continuation and placed on the organ mechanism with a series of musical selections, which permit it to be played continuously. The musical variation is obtained by using the different registers.

f. The position of the pipes is a little peculiar. They are placed from high to low and not in a “V” or reversed “V” as we (*the French-Ed*) do.

#### The Manufacturing Of The Instruments:

The local organ manufacturing is done in Holguin (northwest of Cuba), in a factory named Fabrica de Organos or Fabrica de Organos Neumaticos where twenty persons are employed. It produces four to six instruments per year. It is now a state enterprise and besides organs, it also produces guitars, basses, congas, and other musical instruments.

Different models of organs are produced: 51-, 55-, 56-, 72-, and 8 4 - k e y s . Besides pure manufacturing (of organ pipes, keys and accessories), there is also a department that makes perforated cardboard where

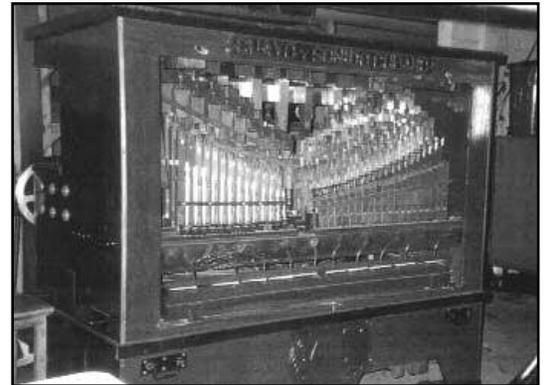


Figure 5. A Cuban “Limonaire” called *Cuya y Sonido Cubano*.

three people work. According to people that have heard them, one would believe they were hearing Limonaire, Marengi or Gavioli organs from the beginning of the century. One has the impression that time has stopped in Cuba as far as organs are concerned.

#### Bibliography

- Les Orgues de Barbarie à Cuba (Draaiorgels op Cuba) (The (Street) Organs in Cuba)*, Alois Broeke, *Het Pierement*, 3/1989
- Fornaris, l'homme qui fonda la tradition des orgues de Barbarie à Cuba (Fornaris, grondlegger van de draaiorgel traditie op Cuba) (Fornaris, The Man Who Founded The Tradition of (Street) Organs In Cuba)*, *Het Pierement*, 1/1992 pp. 27 - 29
- Tradition de l'orgue de Barbarie à Cuba (Draaiorgeltraditie op Cuba) (Tradition Of The (Street) Organ In Cuba)*, *Het Pierement*, 4/1995 p. 202
- Cien Años de Tradición (One Hundred Years Of Tradition)*, *Het Pierement*, 1/1996 pp.10 - 12
- Le Cubain—aventures musicales avec un orgue de rue (De Cubaan muzikale avonturen met een straatorgel) (The Cuban Musical Adventures With A Street Organ)*, *Het Pierement*, 4/1999 p. 198
- Le voyage de Leon van Leeuwens à Cuba (Leon van Leeuwens reis naar Cuba) (The Trip of Leon van Leeuwens To Cuba)*, Interview Alois Broeke—foto's Leon van Leeuwen, *Het Pierement*, 3/1996 pp. 112-114
- Cien Años de Tradición (One Hundred Years Of Tradition)*, *Het Pierement*, 2/1996 p. 71
- Caribbean Dream*, Trevor Taylor, *The Key Frame* 1/1995 p. 6-10 (Fair Organ Preservation Society)

Photos: Bernard Beaufrere

\*This article is reproduced with kind permission of the French “Association des Amis des Instruments et de la Musique Mécanique” (AAIMM). It was published in No 42 (2d trim 2002) of its journal *Musiques Mécaniques Vivantes* (MMV).

Raymond Messelier is Belgian and for 35 years has been interested in all fields of mechanical music, especially large organs.