

The Johnson Organ Company

Lance Johnson

The Early Years

The questions I am asked more than any other are “What got you interested in organs?” or “How did you get into the organ business?” I tell people that my software came with an organ program at the time of my birth. I had a great grandfather who was an amateur organ builder, and whose daughter and grand daughter became church organists. A great uncle was a bandleader and sold church organs for Wurlitzer. This line of musical genes was thus passed on to me who probably learned to say “organ” before “mom” and “dad.”



Figure 1. Lance Johnson voicing trumpets for the Johnson Style 163 band organ.

In my hometown of Fergus Falls, Minnesota, I begged my parents to have us sit behind the organist in church as I was fascinated by what she was doing.



Figure 2. Skip Johnson applying gold to the Style 163 scroll.

When I was about seven or eight, I heard one of the most beautiful sounds imaginable coming from the NP Park (ran along the Northern Pacific tracks) three blocks away. I followed the sound and ended up in front of a Spillman, Jr. merry-go-

round with a Wurlitzer Style 105 band organ. I had no interest in taking any rides but just listening to the organ's uplifting music. Seeing drums playing by themselves left me dumbfounded. I later learned that the carnival was Roger's Brothers Shows out of Pelican Rapids, Minnesota, which was only 23 miles away. Each summer, they would set up for a few days in the gravel parking lot next to the park and do a land office business. Every day I would go back to the park and stand in front of the merry-go-round, as I simply could not get enough of the band organ.

The Art B. Thomas carnival also came each year for our county fair, which included a Wurlitzer Style 105 with their merry-go-round.

When I was about ten, I got a Tinker Toy set for Christmas and built a merry-go-round with it complete with an old bed sheet for a tent, which revolved with a tiny fan motor. No band organ yet! Instead, I would hum the same band organ tunes I heard in the park as the little merry-go-round turned.

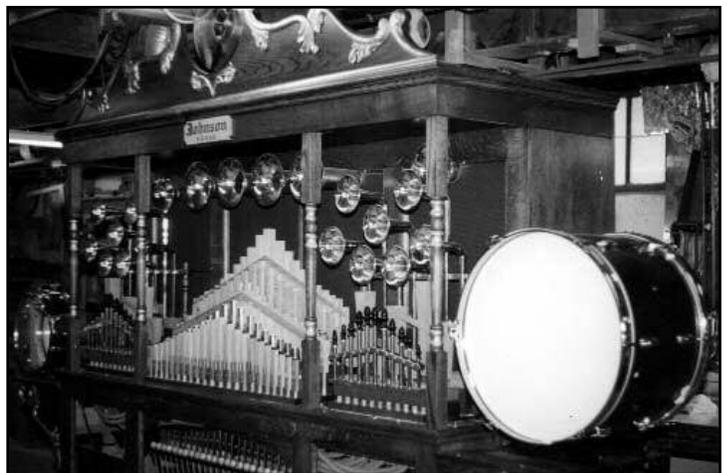


Figure 3. This is a close up of the Style 163 while the organ was still in the shop.

During this period I was taking piano lessons from our church organist who was from the “old school” and very strict. After three years of lessons that I mostly hated, I quit.

A new music store opened about 1951 and they began to stock the Connsonata electric organ. Since the downtown stores were always open on Friday nights, I would go there and play the floor models, mostly playing by ear. I managed to keep on good terms with owner Roy Olson, so he would not throw me out. When he could see how interested I was in organs, he would show me the newest models and what they could do.

When I was 14, I received an old reed organ from my parents for Christmas. I soon had it apart to motorize it (today, this process is frowned upon as it subtracts from the antique value).

While in junior high school, I took classical organ lessons from Dorothy Preus at another Lutheran church, as my piano teacher did not think I had enough basic piano to study organ. In high school, I played in the band and formed a Dixieland group that rehearsed during noon hours.



Figure 4. Factory worker, Willard Held, building a case for a Style 103.

I enrolled in electrical engineering and later architectural engineering at North Dakota State University in Fargo, North Dakota, but found that my studies brought me further and further away from music.

In 1958 I bought a two-manual, three-rank studio Barton theatre pipe organ for

\$100 and carted it back to Fergus Falls to my horrified parents' surprise. I soon had to give concerts to the whole neighborhood, as kids would line up at the open basement windows. The *Minneapolis Tribune* sent a reporter and did a two-page story in the Sunday magazine section on the theatre organ project. Later that year, the organ builder who serviced out area churches died suddenly and left many organs without service. Within months, I found myself in the pipe organ service business as they had heard about my "hobby."



Figure 5. Estera Favolora voicing her new wood violins.

Rink in Moorhead where I played it for nine and one-half years. During this period I enlarged the organ to three manuals and seven ranks with all percussions exposed.

In 1961 I transferred to Concordia College (ELCA) in Moorhead, Minnesota, to become an organ performance major. In order to graduate one year sooner, I had to practice organ five hours per day with one on piano. In 1963 I sold my theatre organ to Bud's Roller

Upon graduation in 1964 I became sales and service representative for M. P. Möller pipe organs for the two Dakotas. By this time, I had built four new organs and had upgraded four more. I continued to build new organs, which did not please Moller. They suggested that it might be a good idea for me to resign which I did. Meanwhile, we had hired six full time employees and found practically no competition, which was later to change drastically. In 1968 we bought our first building in Moorhead, MN and proceeded to build new organs with six being shipped out in 1969.



Figure 6. Mike Johnson, service director, assembling transverse brass Piccolos.

Johnson Band Organ Production Begins

By 1970 we found our business taking a sharp downturn, which we partially blamed on a recession. I let the men do the church organ work while I decided to embark on my first research and development project (we were also building and repairing wood boats).

I heard that an automatic musical instrument collector nearby had a Wurlitzer Style 105 band organ that did not play. I then cut a deal with him—if he would allow me to analyze the band organ by taking it back to my shop I would put it back in playing condition.

Little did I know what I was in for! The organ had the dreaded four-in-one unit valves that had bad leather and would not seal airtight because of the poor quality die cast metal used (Wurlitzer later abandoned these in favor of wood block individual valves).

When I returned the organ, it was in A-1 condition and I had learned a lot about the construction. I also began corresponding with Ralph Tussing (North Tonawanda, New York), whom I learned later had bought the band organ department when Wurlitzer phased out all pipe organ activity. Ralph could not type and his letters were riddled with type-over corrections, which I found amusing. However, he had rolls to sell, as well as the Style 105 tracker bar scale that was an ink impression of an existing one. I then decided that I would build a band organ. Not having a pipe shop available, I ordered all the pipes from Organ Supply Corporation. Since I was not aware of unit valve blocks being available, I built the first organ with electric action. The

violins were spotted metal and did not have the sizzle and power of the wood counterpart. When the organ was almost complete a man, who ran the roller rink where I played, bought it off the floor to advertise his new theme park.

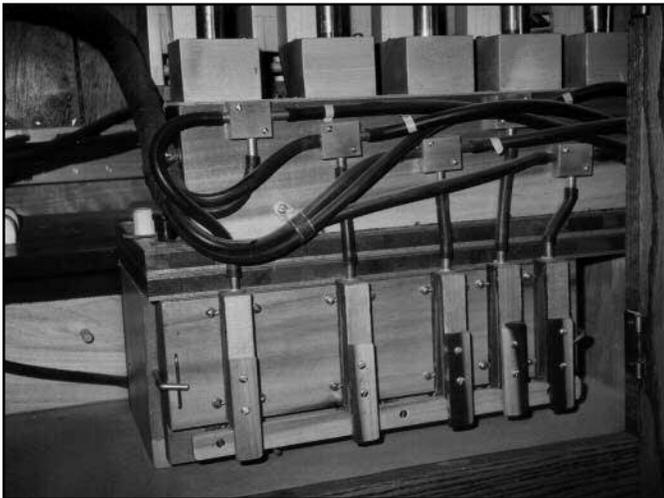


Figure 7. Bass chest for Style 105 which contains five basses and one accompaniment note. The front section comes off by turning several “L” screws—the entire section and valves are then in your hands.

I then met a pretty young widow named Judy while playing the theatre organ for roller-skating. During my break, I sat next to her in the concession area and asked her name and what her husband did (a sneaky way to find out if she was married). She said her name was Judy and her husband had just died. “Would you like to see a picture of my five kids?” she asked. This stopped me in my tracks and I decided that I would not attempt to ask her out. Six months later we were married. The six for the price of one package deal produced for me an instant family with five kids ranging from three to eight years. When we arrived home from our honeymoon, the kids had baked us a wedding cake. The next day, two of them came down with chicken pox, and by the end of the week, they all had it!



Figure 8. Bookkeeper and Vice President, Eva Lynnes, sorting Style 125 rolls.

My oldest daughter decided to have a Muscular Dystrophy fund-raising carnival in the park. At age nine she was already planning her career in medicine. She set up her booths including a dunking stool that I built for her. The new band organ was used to advertise the carnival. The band organ did the trick because in no time flat, the park was full of people watching

their friends getting dunked. When my wife’s sister heard the band organ, tears welled up in her eyes, and I asked her what was wrong. She said that she had not heard a band organ since she was very small and it brought back wonderful memories for her.

It was then that I began to fully realize the impact that band organ music had on people. Marilou’s carnival had raised over \$40, which would be over \$100 in today’s money. Everyone agreed that the band organ got the people to the park. The kids did all the rest. Her compassion for those who had Muscular Dystrophy had produced an event that no one would forget (Marilou Johnson Sollom, MD, died from cancer in 2003). We were all elated, to say the least, that this band organ had touched so many lives.

Then one day I got a call from an automatic musical instrument dealer who had heard we built band organs and wondered if we would build them exclusively for him. There was one needed stipulation—our company name could not appear anywhere on the organ, so he could attach his. He said that the cost must be kept very low so he could sell them. Each time he would get anywhere from two to four organs, he would say that he had difficulty in selling them so I needed to cut costs. This I would not do but I did allow him to use his own unit valves (which were made of aluminum and had rubber diaphragms). I learned later that these soon failed. I also learned that he was marking up the organs by 100%. By now, we were using vacuum action. And, by the late 1970s, we were making our own pipes including the use of brass horns.



Figure 9. Lance at the Western Minnesota Steam Threshers Reunion at Rolleg, Minnesota, laying out new music for the crowds next to a 1920 Parker steam carousel. Holes are punched during the show and then the roll is played the following year. The carousel has a 1985 Johnson band organ Style 125B. The show is open only the four days around Labor Day and has over 1,500 workers and draws over 60,000 people. The carousel rides are free.

By 1980 he had ceased doing business so we did not have a band organ dealership anymore. Several more band organs went to individuals. Since we were always so busy with church organ work, we laid our band organ business aside and did not attempt to find another dealer.

In 1984 our own regional engine show, the Western Minnesota Steam Thresher’s Reunion received a circa-1920

Parker merry-go-round as a donation. It was in very poor condition, having been on the carnival circuit for decades with layers of park paint on the horses (the show operated each Labor Day weekend for four days and drew over 60,000 people). There really was not much for young people to see and do until the merry-go-round was operable. They were using a little boom box with band organ tapes for music. Since we had already built so many band organs, I thought it would be fun to build one and see how people would react by putting it on the merry-go-round. The first time we started it up, the merry-go-round was inundated with people lined up to ride. More volunteers had to be recruited to handle the crowds. Frustrated engine operators were losing their spectators to the merry-go-round. Families started to bring their kids to the show so they could ride the merry-go-round. At the end of the show, the club bought the organ.

The Band Organs Make a Comeback

In 1997 I received a call from a carnival owner who told me he had just signed a contract for a half million dollar Victorian carousel from Chance Rides in Wichita, Kansas, and that it would have a Johnson band organ.



Figure 10. One of seven boats built at Johnson Organ Company—this is a Seagull class eighteen footer.

We then decided to develop a larger model and scrap some of the old designs and start a new series of organs that would reflect higher quality than the 1970's organs. We enlarged the case, added some Victorian designs and installed a full-length 16-foot wood trombone. The harmonic brass trumpets were so loud that I had to use ear protection to tune it. We delivered the organ to the Clay County fair at Barnsville, MN where they were, for the first time, using the new Chance carousel. The organ and carousel were an instant hit with several TV stations doing news features. People lined up for rides.

During the process of designing the organ case, I was concerned that the organ would fit inside as the new Victorian style had scenery panels on the ground. I inquired for some dimensions to make sure the organ would fit. When I first installed it I found the cymbal was covered by the revolving scenery. I had to change the cymbal position to the front of the bass drum so it could be seen and heard.

A few weeks later I got a call from them—they were having trouble with the rolls. He sent a couple back that looked like they had gotten too close to a shredder. I sent my son, Mike, who is our service director, to southern Minnesota to try to learn why the rolls were being chewed up. He had discovered that the



Figure 11. This is a three manual, 40 rank pipe organ build for the Voorhees Chapel at Jamestown College, Jamestown, North Dakota. The organ features Johnson-made rosewood keyboards. Pictured are Skip, Lance and Mike Johnson.

old gentleman who ran the carousel was leaving the nut loose on the spool so that the paper lost its tracking ability. It seems that he had trouble with his hands and had not enough strength to turn the nut tightly. He had also ignored our instructions about keeping the tracker bar filter clean as dead notes were occurring. He had little knowledge of music and could not hear when notes were missing. To make matters worse, the vacuum blowers were burning out every few days. Since we had used these successfully for decades, I was at a loss to figure out what was wrong. We contacted the manufacturer but to no avail. Later, a motor shop told us that the motors had been downgraded in quality by the way they were wired and the use of plastics, where metal was previously used. It was then we changed to a brushless motor.

Then more bad luck—the organ, which traveled in a converted sleeper cab on a semi tractor, was subject to a sharp jolt as the driver hit a large pothole in a construction zone. The organ, as we figured, may have jumped as much as two feet off the floor. When they reached their destination, they found the organ in pieces. Half of the pipes had popped out and the player action and unit valve chest were lying on the bottom of the case. It took four days to reassemble the organ. They had to suffer low use of his new carousel until the band organ was back in service.

The Present

We are now building band organs on a full time basis. We have a MIDI capability for all styles that should make the carnival people happy.

We are also in the process of building up an inventory of organs of all sizes so we can ship without delay. We found by experience that band organ enthusiasts don't want to wait for their instrument. We have also done some re-engineering so that the organ is easier to access for service. Any part now can be accessed without tearing down the organ.

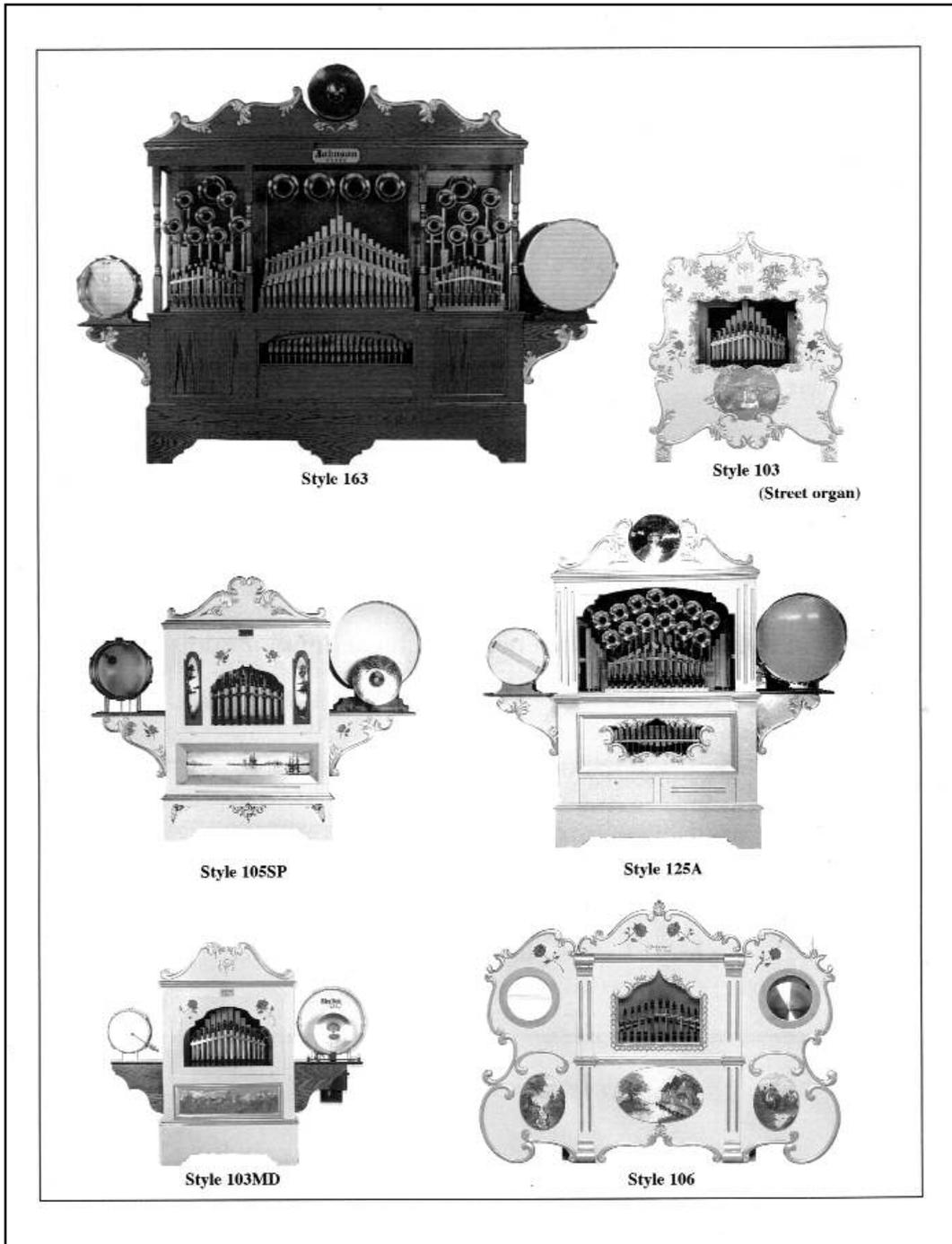


Figure 12. An advertising brochure from the Johnson Organ Company details six organs in their current line-up.

We are able to acquire quieter blowers, which are precision built with all moving parts carefully balanced.

We have a young talented girl who now makes all our pipes. Estera Favalora started with us while only 17 years old doing odd jobs but now she can build over half of the organ without help (**Figure 5**). When she came to work for us, she presented me with a group of photos she had taken while a high school student. These were of band organs she had visited around the country. She now also does all the artwork on the band organ facades.

One of our recent customers, Randy MacDonald, who owns a flea circus, noted: “We had one of the most touching experiences over Independence Day celebrations with the new Johnson organ. People would walk by and start to smile, watch for a while, and then dance away.”

Our next project will be to develop a tabletop organ, which can double for a hurdy-gurdy. This field has become crowded but we hope we can offer a good product.

Lance Johnson has been active with organs since he was four years old. He opened up the Johnson Pipe Organ shop in 1954. In 1973 he helped form a new professional organization, The American Institute of Organ Builders, of which he has served as Vice President and lectured several times. He has served 10 years as technical writer for *Theatre Organ* magazine with over 60 published articles on organ building. Another hobby is that of boat building—he has built seven boats and sails on Pelican Lake, Minnesota.