

## Mystery of “Das Eichhoernchen” Solved!

Kevin Sheehan

### Prolog

At age 17 (summer of 1954) I was working at a girls camp on Sebago Lake in southern Maine. I met a young woman who needed a ride to Old Orchard Beach where she was starting a new job. After accomplishing that we walked down to the pier where I heard, for the first time, the dependable sound of a Wurlitzer 157 which was on a Denzel carousel. This made me stop dead in my tracks. I stood listening and watching with tears in my eyes until they closed the ride at midnight (my date, having abandoned me early in the evening, went to sell lemonade at a stand on the pier). Thereafter, most evenings were spent

after work at the organ. Later that summer another organ was discovered at Old Orchard: a Wurlitzer 150 housed on the beach in a shack so small that the drum wings had to be turned sideways to fit it in. The front shutter was closed unabling me to see the brass horns clearly; and the organ was pitifully muffled. I requested the operator, a small man with a severe limp, to open the shutter. He complied but only for the duration of two songs because, he said, the clerk of the post office, a half mile up the hill, complained of the noise. Now being fully addicted to these organs I vowed that I would get one someday.

Several years later, upon returning to Old Orchard, I found the little organ and its shack were gone. Inquiring, the management said it was too much trouble and too loud. It had been stored in the back of a warehouse. It was facing a blank wall, horns hidden and its electrical plug dangling. After much discussion with the owner, an

offer was made for the organ of \$550. Having just gotten married and unable to raise the sum, it had to be abandoned. (See Kevin’s poem entitled “Wurlitzer’s Military Band,” page 971, in the *Silver Anniversary Collection* published by the Musical Box Society International, 1974.)



Figure 1. *Das Eichhoernchen* as viewed at a past COAA rally in Holland, Michigan.

In the time spent with the 157, I had learned from the carousel operator that Max Nowicki of Milford, CT was the organ repairman. At the time, I was living not ten miles from Max and began visiting him often. In 1967, I purchased from Max an unrestored Wurlitzer 146.

Its restoration was completed in 1969 with bells added. Playing it for several years in the living room of our home in Orange, CT, we then mounted the organ on a model TT Ford truck and powered it with a Domestic one cylinder engine.

Soon after Hughes Rider’s tour of German organs in 1979, I became intrigued by the hand-cranked barrel organs and larger book-operated street organs. Subsequently, came the purchase of a Riemer and two Bacigalupo organs. More organs were to follow: A 60-key Hooguys, a new Page and Howard 90-key Carl Frei street organ, and a Wurlitzer Caliola (this is atop a 1929 Ford AA truck). Still I had not yet found just the right sound. Once retired, the decision was made to have an organ built to my specs, namely *Das Eichhoernchen* (Figure 1 & Front Cover).

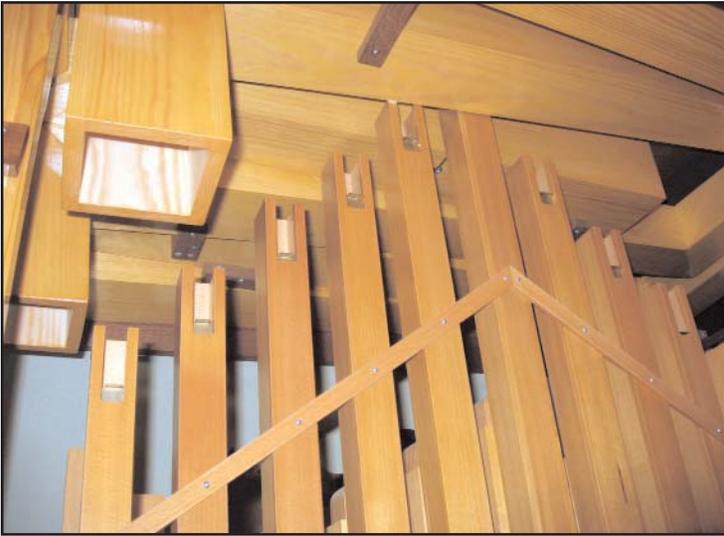


Figure 2. This view of the interior shows the accompaniment cello pipes in the foreground and overhead, the trombone resonators.

### The Organ: *Das Eichhoernchen*

In 2002, Elbert Puer, third-generation builder of Bussum, Holland, finished constructing *Das Eichhoernchen* street organ with its 200 pipes and 64 keys, according to my unique specifications (Figures 2-3).

Several years ago, while attending a MBSI convention, Phil Jamison was giving a workshop on Dutch street organs. He played a recording of Elbert Puer's *Der Hollander* which impressed me. Having admired all the new and wonderful organ builders, the recordings of the Puer instruments had the sound I was looking for. Moreover, the firm came highly recommended by organ friends in the know.

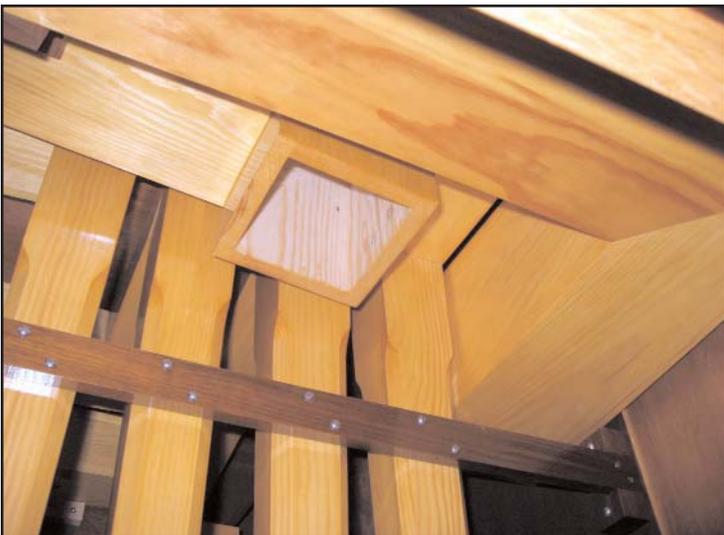


Figure 3. A view of the trombone pipes and resonators.



Figure 4. Here are the 16-foot trombones with tuning rods.

At first I enjoyed the Limonaire 56-key scale but then also wanted to add a small counter-melody division. I was not enthusiastic about the sound of the normal 8' trombone (too 'goosey' in the upper register) and therefore specified the deep 16' trombone to give the bass more of a tuba sound (Figure 4).

The organ could have been powered with a 110-volt motor but having a minor sugar problem, which I have controlled with diet and exercise, hand-cranking was chosen first for my health, and second, for the pleasure of adding expression to the music. I can be at one end of the instrument and share its operation with the audience at street level (Figure 5). A third benefit is the lack of a noisy blower to detract from the music.



Figure 5. Kevin Sheehan hand-cranking *Das Eichhoernchen*.

While Puer does not arrange music he does punch the books based on computer arrangements made by others. We are gradually building a library of eclectic tunes rang-

ing from Bach to the Beatles. The music is from arrangers in Holland (Jan Kees de Ruijter, Tom Meijer, Hiddo Van Os, Marco Hage, etc.) and Texas (Wayne Holton).



Figure 6 and 7 (inset). The Squirrel presents himself in front of two ranks of bourdon Celeste pipes. The violin pipes are behind.

### The Squirrel

The organ and its Dutch-made cart were shipped together in a 20' metal container. It came by ship from Rotterdam to England and then across the Atlantic and up the St. Lawrence to Montreal, where it was off-loaded onto a tractor trailer truck. The truck was met at Derby Line, VT at the Canadian border. No duty was required because the instrument was titled as a “key-organ.” The truck was immediately sidelined to a loading dock. Anxious to see the organ for the first time and rushing over to have a look, I was greeted by a very large uniformed officer who instructed me to return to my vehicle and wait until their inspection had been completed. A half hour later the same officer approached my car window and said, “You can go now, but I have just one question:



Figure 8. One of the paintings depicting our Maine log home done by Wendy Newcomb.

What’s the squirrel for?” My reply: “Oh, he’s the bandmaster who conducts the music.” The officer rolled his eyes heavenward, shook his head and walked away.

We followed the tractor trailer containing the organ back to Maine to where our trailer was parked. When the container was opened, a small cardboard box re-taped with U.S. customs labeling, the only item that had apparently been opened. Inside the box was the carved wooden squirrel bandmaster (**Figures 6 & 7**).

Local Sebago, Maine, graphic artist Wendy Newcomb painted the facade (**Figure 8**) dedicated to the Maine Red Squirrel (das Rote Eichhoernchen). The carved red squirrel wears a red hat which Elbert Puer refers to as a Christmas cap. His motions are coupled to the bass drum.



Figure 9. *Das Eichhoernchen* as seen from the back. The 3-wheel pushcart can be appreciated from this view.

### The Trailer

We wanted to display the organ in the traditional manner, namely on an authentic three-wheel pushcart at street level (**Figure 9**). This necessitated a very tall box trailer (9' tall opening) with a ramp door of this length at the rear and a power winch to pull the two ton organ up the ramp. A snowmobile company in Maine was contracted to make a custom trailer. Larry Kern was very helpful in suggesting how we outfit this trailer for reliable towing. Even so, we’ve had our skirmishes: rubbing tree branches and having the electric cord cut when the trailer jack-knifed! Until we installed rigid aluminum channels on the ramp for the cart wheels, the wheels punched through the plywood ramp, ruining it.

### Epilogue

Kevin has relished cranking the organ with Lindy working hand puppets for several COOA rallies, including a recent one on Lake Ontario. [*This has been a very popular organ with enthusiasts as well as the public—Ed*]

Linda and Kevin, both born in 1937, met on a blind date at Cornell in 1959. Kev tested cars for 33 years for Consumer Reports; Lindy taught the gifted in an inner-city high school in New Haven for 26 years. Their daughter is an artist in Cologne, Germany; Their son produced a Raffin-cranking grandson in Connecticut. They retired to Maine where they now nurture red squirrels and organs.