

Letter to the Editor . . .

A Note About Paul Eakins and Band Organ History:

Paul Eakins is rightfully a legend in the band organ collecting movement. He was among the first to recognize the fascinating music and heritage that was embodied in mechanical organs as others were literally destroying them. Not content to just save, preserve and restore them, Eakins exposed a broad range of the American public to organs via his tourist attractions and traveling exhibitions. The abundance of recordings that he sold via the Audio Fidelity label also introduced many nascent enthusiasts to the world of band organs, or fueled their interest by illustrating the variety of their appearances and sounds. Indeed, it would be hard to identify any single person who did more to promote the general public's awareness and interest in band organs on a national scale. The names that he bestowed on a number of band organs are known across three or four continents even today. [Ron Bopp, "I Believe If I Got Hold Of One Of Those, I Could Make It Work," *AMICA News Bulletin*, XXXIII, 6, pages 309-314 and "Paul Eakins Gay 90s Organ Collection," *COAA Carousel Organ*, 4, pages 3-6.]

Importantly, Eakins recognized the value of surviving European-built book organs and generally maintained the integrity of the configuration in which he found them. Resisting the easier route of converting them to rolls, he went to the extent of locating people in Europe who could furnish the cardboard books that brought them back to life. Books had not been made commercially in the United States since the early 1950s, or perhaps a bit before, and were expensive, both to purchase and ship across the ocean. In the days before anyone thought of a "global

economy," Eakins was sending money to people he'd never met, those who had the special talents necessary to make his unusual instruments play once again.

There is also adequate evidence to confirm that Eakins had a genuine interest in the accurate history of his machines, a normal evolutionary process as one collects and restores band organs or anything with a heritage. During the course of acquisition and restoration, he took a number of photographs, not as many as we'd like, but at least some that have proven to be important in figuring out their stories. He asked the sellers for what they knew, consulted with other collectors and long-serving restorers, and also posed queries to the people in Europe. What he was able to gather and discern became the basis for his interpretation of the organ's history, as presented at his attractions, on television, LP sleeve covers and elsewhere. As is not uncommon, Eakins encountered conflicts in various stories. Concerning one machine, he wrote this in 1965: "The information that we were given on the machine does not tally at all with the European story. . . . The information from [deleted] is entirely different from that we obtained here." Unfortunately, because of such disagreements, even the exercise of his best judgment led to the dissemination of information that is now subject to question and revision.

In the post-World War II era of roadside attractions and such, collecting in many fields was in its infancy and accurate data was seldom readily available. Attics and elsewhere were disgorging their treasures with the generational change, resulting in broad-scale aggrandizement of many objects. Vintage, ownership and other attributes were often exaggerated recklessly in the face of common

sense, all to impress people or justify higher than reasonable prices. It would take another twenty to forty years before documentation became readily available, and discoveries are still being made today. Eakins was resistant to the impulse to aggrandize a story as others did in the public arena, and to the best of our knowledge never intentionally misled anyone about organ history. With all aspects of honesty, he provided the best available information, to the best of his ability to research, uncover and confirm it, a commendable approach in all regards.

Sadley, in the early days of collecting there were many unknowns and uncertainties in organ history. Many of the same gaps remain today. Yet, there are also many things that have been learned that cause us to discard information that was accepted and utilized by Eakins in publications, on LP sleeves and other places. Unfortunately, the dogma continues to be repeated on some websites and in other publications unto today, without question or confirmation. In some cases the errors are obvious.

For example, it is now clear than the 80-key organ he named *The Emperor* wasn't built in 1885 for a Detroit beer garden. A price of \$14,000 is also not reasonable, given the data now available on period organ prices. These portions of the provenance were supplied to him by the prior owner of the instrument. It's indeed basically a Mortier, built in Belgium, but it was likely not constructed until circa 1910. It first served a Belgian dance hall before being shipped over to a Detroit establishment that catered to the Belgian community in the Motor City. It's still a very important music machine, perhaps the first Mortier ever exported to North America.

Sadie Mae, a large military band organ, was identified as a 99-key Gavioli, perhaps because it played on a scale generally affiliated with that manufacturer. Further study would indicate that it is actually a Model 28A, 100-key deKleist, built in North Tonawanda, New York. There is a photograph of what may be this exact organ both in a deKleist catalog and in front of a North Tonawanda factory. If the façade is ever stripped of the paint applied to it, the grain pattern might confirm the association beyond question. In looking at the details of this instrument, it should be noted that the violin freins are not the typical Gavioli-stamped pieces of curved brass, but an unusual construction that spans across the width of the pipe, a configuration that could have avoided conflict with the Gavioli patent. It is also an important instrument, the largest intact deKleist known to exist today.

The organ that Eakins called *Pinkey* was identified as an 89-key Hooghuy's cylinder organ that played in a German park. A recent study of 65-key Gavioli organs associates the *Pinkey* façade with that size and make and no other. There are also no examples of the façade known to have ever been used in Europe. We've frankly never heard of a Hooghuy's in a German park (of which there were very few) or any German show enterprise for that matter. As for Hooghuy's, one member of the family has assured us that the chassis is not of his family's make. Another organ builder tentatively identified it as a modified Gavioli. A recent count of the pallets in the chest numbered them at 92, with two more removed as part of a modification. It would seem to have been 94-keys or perhaps larger. It's a valued organ with a long-time heritage of use on American carousels.

The foregoing discussion has served to bring us to *Madam Laura*,

the subject of an interesting article in COAA journal No. 37. Eakins identified the organ as a late 1890s Gavioli, originally playing a 94-key cylinder and then an 87-key book. We don't know what brought about Eakins' identification of the maker as such. It was stated that there were some newspapers inside that provided the late 1890s date, but no language or city or origin was specified for them. Knowing if they were French, English or even Italian could be crucial, as would the city of their issuance. Some day when the pump or chest is opened again, perhaps they can be re-examined.

By the late 1890s, Gavioli had replaced cylinder organ manufacture with book organ work, particularly focusing on the 57 and 87-key designs. If *Madam Laura* was a 94-key cylinder organ, it would date from earlier in the 1890s. As a book scale, Gavioli didn't use the 94-key design until after the issuance of the circa 1906 catalog. The revolving columns, identified as a Gavioli feature, can actually be found on numerous makes, a means by which rather static facades were provided with visual interest. The one-time somewhat unique Gavioli signature, the cut-out wooden element below the snare drum, has now been found on instruments from other builders, too.

The *Madam Laura* pipe specification is also unlike any Gavioli known to the writer. The closest to it in the Gavioli heritage is the 87-key book organ known as *De Schelm*, yet there are no Gavioli-characteristic

pan flutes in *Madam Laura*. Other non-Gavioli aspects of the pipework can be noted.

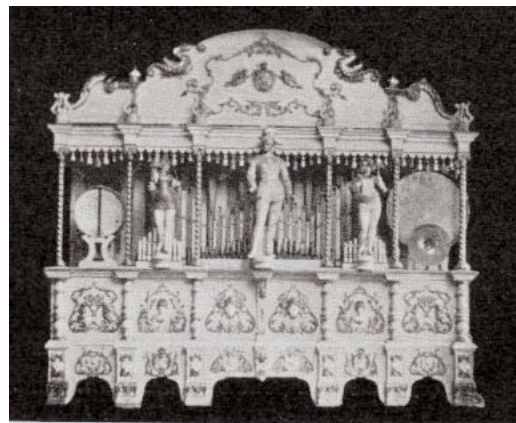
On the other hand, *Madam Laura* is essentially identical, in all regards, pipework and façade-wise, to the instrument depicted in the Muzzio catalog. Even the catalog configuration, 94-key cylinder, fits perfectly. The only substantial difference is the exchange of the bass and snare drums, a deviation explainable by the space required for the 1914 installation of the key frame. Muzzio was a long-time organ man and photos of his shop interior confirm that new organ construction indeed took place therein by the turn of the century.

Do any of these revisions of the instrument histories impact our appreciation for Paul Eakins and what he accomplished? Absolutely not! However,

we should also recognize that knowledge of history improves with the passage of time and that some of his information is now outdated and needs to be set aside.

Would removal of *Madam Laura* from the Gavioli opus list diminish the importance of this instrument? Absolutely not! It would go under the column of Muzzio. Therefore, it may well be the only surviving large organ by the firm, making *Madam Laura* an even rarer musical device. It needs to be appreciated for what it is: a very early example of a large, American-made cylinder organ inspired by French precedents. That is something seldom seen today.

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A catalog illustration of the 94-key Muzzio.
Photo: Fred Dahlinger collection.