

Becoming a Gaviman: Bringing the Diamond Jubilee Organ to America

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It was on a very cold, rainy day in September 1979, standing in the middle of a muddy Dorset wheat field that I first thought of bringing a large Gavioli fairground organ to America. A graduate student sent to England for a science conference, I'd rented a Mini Cooper (the original, tiny one) and set off to tour England for the first time. Just weeks earlier, I had seen an impressive slide show about English steam fairs at a Music Box Society convention. Good fortune had brought me to England during the Great Working of Steam Engines at Stourpaine Bushes in Dorset, so I careened down the left-hand side of the motorway, determined to see the event.

Already a mechanical music enthusiast, I had half filled my little house in Palo Alto, CA, with a disassembled player piano. I had attended a few MBSI meetings and was aware that there were mechanical music wonders far surpassing the phonographs and junker pianos I had accumulated to that date. The most impressive music machine that I could remember was a Wurlitzer band organ displayed on the back of a pickup truck at a county fair. I was completely unprepared for the wonders of Dorset.

The Stourpaine fair comprised more than two hundred acres filled with every possible steam driven contrivance (no doubt a few impossible ones as well). The traction engines, plows, rollers, sawmills, threshers, cars and boats were amazing enough, but completely unexpected were the showmen's engines. These hissing monsters, each one the size of a small locomotive, decked out with polished brass, bright paint, and festive lights, were

providing the power to run the most wonderful carnival midway imaginable. The fancy painted gallopers, waltzers, steam yachts, and helter-skelter were eye-dazzling, but it was the sounds from the fairground that changed my life.

From every direction came the most amazing music I had ever heard. Huge, powerful organs with gilded fronts and gleaming brass trumpets were pumping out marches, waltzes, and even operatic arias. The names emblazoned on their casework were unfamiliar and exotic: Gavioli, Marengi, Mortier, and Limonaire (**Figure 1**). Much as I loved the three honking bass notes of a Wurlitzer 150, these organs with their full complement of notes, ability to automatically change registers, and bank after bank of pipes transfixed me. It was band organ music on steroids, and I knew that I had to have one of those astonishing machines.



Figure 1. The Great Working of Steam Engines at Stourpaine Bushes, 1979. My first acquaintance with the big European fairground organs. At that point I hadn't realized that "Wellies" and a slicker were de rigueur for the Dorset Fair.



Figure 2. The gallopers at Wonderland Amusement Park, Cleethorpes with the Gavioli mounted in the center. The photo is probably from the 1960's.

At about this same time, in the northern corner of England, another of these magnificent organs had reached the end of its working life. The organ, an 89-key Gavioli, had played in the center of a steam-driven gallopers (carousel) at Wonderland Park in the seaside town of Cleethorpes for the previous 30 years (**Figure 2 & 3**). The Screeton family of Barton-upon-Humber purchased the organ from the park and initiated restoration work. Some organ work was done, the carvings were re-painted by the

well-known fair-ground artist, Mr. James Tiller, but the project stalled. The carvings and organ parts were stored safely, but the case, with the main bellows, was allowed to sit out in the weather and was gradually destroyed.

Prior to this inglorious end the organ led a long and productive life in show land. It was built as an 87-key organ by Gavioli in Paris, probably between 1895 and 1899—we've arbitrarily declared it's

birth year to be 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Like most of Gavioli's production of those years, it was probably built for the British export market. According to British fairground historian Philip Upchurch it is speculated that the organ was first owned by Mr. Fred Gray of Hampstead, London, and was paired with a spinning top gondola switchback ride. The organ and ride changed hands several times, and the organ was moved to different rides over the years, ending up in a permanent installation at Wonderland, probably in the 1930s.

In 1952 the organ was converted to the 89-key VB scale by Victor Chiappa, adding the violin and baritone pipes that give the scale its name as well as adding a register box to turn those pipes on and off from the cardboard books. The saxophone register wasn't implemented at that time, and at that point the organ had no bells (glockenspiel). It was also redecorated at this time, with musical notes painted on the front (**Figure 4**). The organ played at Wonderland until 1975 when it was sold to the Sreetons.

In the 20+ years that followed my first visit to what is now the Great Dorset Steam Fair, my love for and interest in these instruments continued to grow. By early 2000 I began to realize that if I was ever going to have one I'd better get started working on it. Because of the high cost and scarcity of antique organs I concluded that building a reproduction organ might be my only option. Having seen Ken Smith's reproduction 89-key G4 scale Gavioli organ



Figure 3, The Gavioli prior to conversion to 89 keys in the 3-abreast gallopers at Wonderland Amusement Park, Cleethorpes, England. Photo courtesy of Philip Upchurch.

and James Noyce's 98-key Marengi I knew that reproductions could be done well. After talking with a number of builders I connected with Andrew Whitehead of Stratford-upon-Avon (the builder of Noyce's Marengi) and began planning for the new organ. While very exciting, this process soon extended into years, with the prospect of a completed organ still many years in the future.

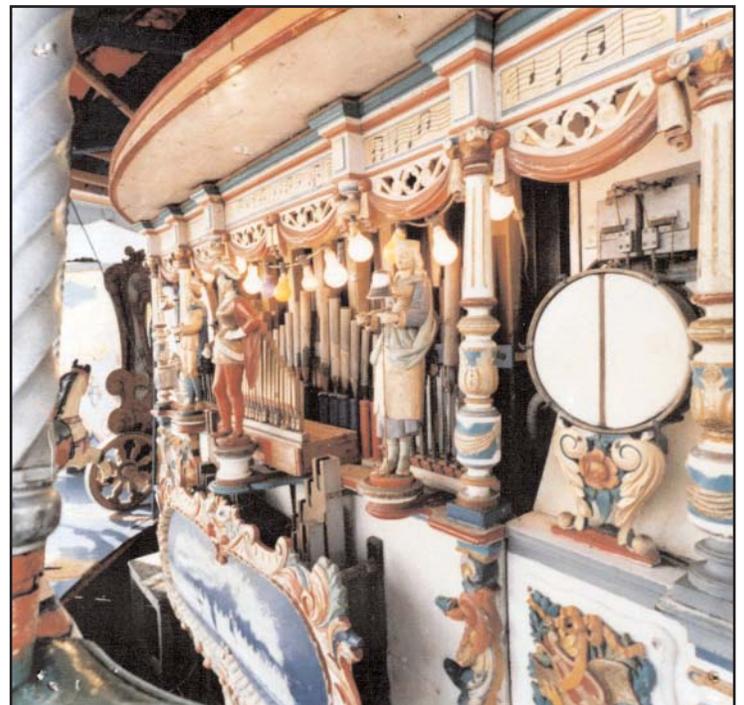


Figure 4. The Gavioli mounted in a smaller gallopers post-conversion to the 89 VB scale, probably in the 1960s. The violin pipes are removed from the organ in this photo. Photo courtesy of Rosie Sreeton Armitage.

It was, therefore, with much excitement that I found a pointer on the iMOD fairground organ discussion group to an Internet ad that offered the Cleethorpes Gavioli for sale. I was on the phone in minutes only to find that someone else had already expressed interest in it. After a nail-biting week of waiting to hear if the first caller bought the organ, I was on a plane to London with the encouragement of my wife, who said, “If it is the right machine, for heaven’s sake, buy it!” I took the train from London to Hull, where I met Andrew Whitehead and we then proceeded to the yard where the organ was stored. Richard and Rosie (Screeton) Armitage were lovely hosts, patiently waiting while we looked through all the disassembled pieces and parts (**Figure 5**) of the organ for hours. We concluded that all of the important parts of the organ had survived in good condition. It was the right machine. Twenty-five years after first seeing one I was the proud owner of an 89-key Gavioli fairground organ, albeit one in boxes and baskets.



Figure 5. The organ as found in 2007. All the parts were there, mostly in very good condition. How it might sound when assembled was a mystery.

With the help of Brian Wells (restoration joiner and owner of the “American” Gavioli) the organ was transported to Brian’s shop the following week and the race against the clock to complete restoration was begun. Britain, like much of Europe, imposes a value-added tax, (VAT), on every transaction (whether or not value is added, it seems!). This 17½% sales tax can be refunded if the item purchased is exported out of the EU within three months. This provided a tangible and substantial incentive to meet the deadline. By working with the surprisingly friendly and helpful people from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs office, it was possible to get an extension of three months because I was purchasing the restoration work in England, but the timing was tight nevertheless.



Figure 6. Reproduction brass drum, made by hand from scratch to precisely match the originals.

With the top-quality craftsmen available to do the work, I committed to funding a top-notch restoration. It did not make sense to leave 30-year-old leather in the instrument, so Andrew took parts of the organ to his shop near Stratford for re-leathering and fine adjustment. Brian, with partner Dave Heritage, worked in their shop in Banbury to build new casework to house the organ. The main case had been completely lost, replaced with a crude plywood box, while the weathered drum cases had suffered the indignity of getting sawn in half. Fortunately, Brian’s instrument is a close match to mine and it was possible to build an exact replica of Brian’s case to fit my instrument. In addition to the main case and drum cases, the drums had been lost over time and the box pipes in the baritone section were missing, either lost or never added, and had to be made new. The new brass drums are exact replicas of the old drums, made by hand using the original techniques of fabrication. They are works of art! (**Figure 6**) After a couple of rounds of my suggesting that a painted case would be fine and Andrew and Brian pointedly reminding me that French walnut veneer was really the correct finish, we went with the walnut, a choice that I’m very happy with now (**Figure 7**).

While the restoration work proceeded in England, I was hard at work arranging for an export license, shipping, and insurance. Once again I was pleasantly surprised by the friendly helpfulness of the government officers responsible for the export license process. It was necessary to prove that the organ was over 100 years old to

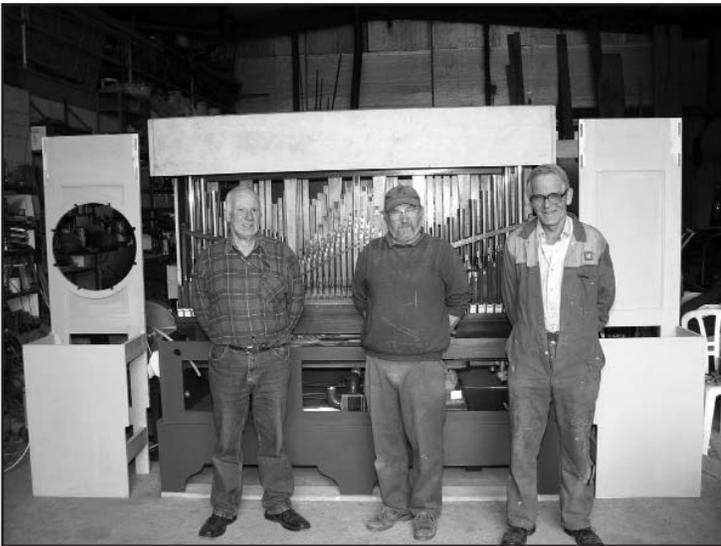


Figure 7. The organ in mid-restoration. Andrew Whitehead (left) did the organ work, David Heritage (center) and Brian Wells (right) built the new casework to precisely match either the original parts we had or other contemporaneous organs.

avoid an import duty coming into the US. It was also necessary to show that it had been in England over 50 years, lest it be necessary to also obtain export approval from the French government.



Figure 8. Delivery day in America. It took five massive crates to ship one Gavioli organ.

Finally the happy day arrived when I took a phone call from England and heard the sound of my re-born Gavioli organ. Even with telephone handset fidelity it sounded wonderful! Work to complete the restoration continued until the moment that the packers arrived to build shipping crates around the organ. The organ's journey included an ocean crossing which took less than a week, another 10 days to clear customs and get trucked from the port in New Jersey to Boston. Finally, an enormous flatbed truck carrying the biggest box I'd ever seen, as well as a suitably sized fork lift truck, showed up on

our suburban street, and I immediately began to worry about the measurements I'd taken that said it would easily fit into our garage (**Figure 8**). When the forklift pushed the organ into our garage, it made it through the door by $\frac{1}{4}$ ".

Three frenetic hours of uncrating and assembly later there was a real Gavioli organ sitting in my garage and it was time to play the first book. As a Monty Python (and John Philip Sousa) fan, the choice was obvious—the *Liberty Bell March*, the song I now use to begin every performance. The tuning was horrible as a result of the shipping and climate change, the acoustics of playing a large organ in a small garage were awful, there were a couple of ciphers from things that had gotten jostled out of place while shipping, but no organ ever sounded sweeter.

From that climactic point there was still much work to be done to take the organ on tour. It was my intention from the start to have a traveling organ that could be taken to fairs and festivals around the country and be heard properly, outdoors on a fairground. For better or worse, I also knew exactly what I wanted for a display trailer—a European-style trailer with both a side that opened for display and a lifting roof to allow the organ to be fitted with a carved proscenium that could be raised for display and lowered for travel. Finding someone in the US willing to make such a thing turned out to be a challenge. After I had been turned down by all the well-known trailer manufacturers, Larry Kern, Texas, connected me with a small concession trailer maker, M Manufacturing of Austintown, Ohio. Jim Molnar from M had been located next to Larry's Ambassador Organ at the Gibtown show, so at least he had some idea of what I wanted. Jim and Joe Cetor were willing to have a crack at it, so we jointly designed a trailer that combined many of the best features of all the organ trailers I had seen and photographed traveling around England, Europe and the States. All aluminum and stainless steel, operable by a single person, carrying a quiet generator that could power the organ, lights, and other essential amenities (espresso maker, teapot), special suspension to minimize vibration, and plenty of room for organ, music books and everything else (**Figure 9**). Although the trailer took about six months longer to build than we hoped, it was ready in June of 2008 and as soon as I returned from Waldkirch and the Bumbling Bruder Tour I was off to Ohio in "Bubba" my newly acquired tow vehicle (Ford F350, diesel, dually, super cab) to bring the trailer home.

Finding the right professional to move the organ from our garage into the trailer was also a challenge. The organ is a fragile, valuable antique weighing close to 3000 lbs, so it was not an everyday moving job. Fortunately in Boston such jobs are routine for the Deathwish Piano



Figure 9. The display trailer is ready to travel. The trailer is 24 ft long (without tongue), 11'4" tall when traveling and 8' wide. It carries a 5500 watt diesel generator and sufficient fuel to run for 100 hours. Opening the trailer for display can be done by a single person.

Moving Company. Four large strong men with a lot of experience and an impressive crane made lifting and moving the organ look (relatively) easy. Once the organ was re-assembled on the trailer it was finally time to hear what she really sounded like outdoors (Figure 10). Once again the *Liberty Bell* rang out, this time with the tuning in better shape, and it was wonderful. Before long we had a crowd of small children from around the neighborhood dancing in front of it and I knew that I was going to love being a Gaviman.



Figure 10. The Diamond Jubilee organ open and ready for business in the new display trailer. Signage on the trailer is in the works.

Work on the organ continued during the trailer construction. While we don't know exactly what this organ looked like originally, we do know from early pictures

that organs of this style often had wider facades, with extra cases flanking the drum cases as well as elaborate prosceniums on top of the organ. Because we will use this organ as a stand-alone fairground display, I decided to add appropriate extra side cases, modeled after those on Brian Well's instrument, and to replace the figures that had been separated from the organ during its years in storage. I built the new cases using the exact molding profiles of the rest of the case, making resin castings of the carved parts of the original case for use on the side cases, and going to England to make copies of the curved carvings found on the ends of Brian's Gavioli. Over the winter Andrew Whitehead had built a reproduction Gavioli glockenspiel that I installed on the front shelf (after making the belly case 3" deeper to accommodate the depth of the glockenspiel). Finally we commissioned Johnny Verbeeck's shop in Belgium to make new carved figures; a bandmaster to stand in the center (Figure 11) and two bell ringers to stand in the outermost cases. Signs for the top were made, painted and gilded around the edges to give the top a more finished appearance and she was ready for a public appearance.



Figure 11. The bandmaster of the Diamond Jubilee Gavioli. It was newly carved in lime wood at the Verbeeck shops in Belgium



Figure 12. The Gavioli playing *Circus Renz* at the COAA rally in Olcott Beach, NY.

The first public showing of the Diamond Jubilee Organ was at the Mid-Am MBSI rally at Roscoe Village, Ohio. The days were very hot and humid and, novice Gaviman that I am, I parked the organ so that the afternoon sun baked the organ pipes, throwing their tuning to the winds. It was not the most auspicious beginning. The following week at the COAA rally in Olcott Beach, NY, the organ was in the shade, the temperatures were moderate, and I had fixed several small problems that had appeared during the first hours of continuous playing (Figure 12). Sitting in a lawn chair behind the organ with the breeze whistling through and the sound of a real Gavioli playing all of my favorite tunes (I

had to buy all new music—the organ’s library had been destroyed in a salt water flood), I concluded that life was indeed good and that a big Gavioli sounds as good in America as on a muddy wheat field in Dorset.

Happily, during the Ohio to NY trip, I was able to play the Diamond Jubilee for my 87-year-old father, just one month before he died. What a joy it was to share the realization of my long-time dream with him. Yet, there is still much work yet to be carried out. The organ is now presentable and playing well (Figure 13 & back cover

), but pneumatic motors for the bell ringers and bandmaster are still under construction in my shop. Signage for the trailer, a paint scheme for the new parts, and a new 16' by 3' proscenium will be designed and created to implement the Diamond Jubilee theme. A non-invasive MIDI system awaits installation to permit a greatly expanded music library to supplement the cardboard books, and a great deal of fitting of storage and interior fixtures in the trailer remains to be done. What fun would life be without projects?

The Diamond Jubilee organ is now available for fairs, festivals, events and celebrations of any kind anywhere in the US or Canada. See www.carouselorgan.com for details or contact the author at 508-358-2563 or email to info@carouselorgan.com.

I wish to thank my wife, Jean Milburn, for her expert editorial assistance in finishing this article.

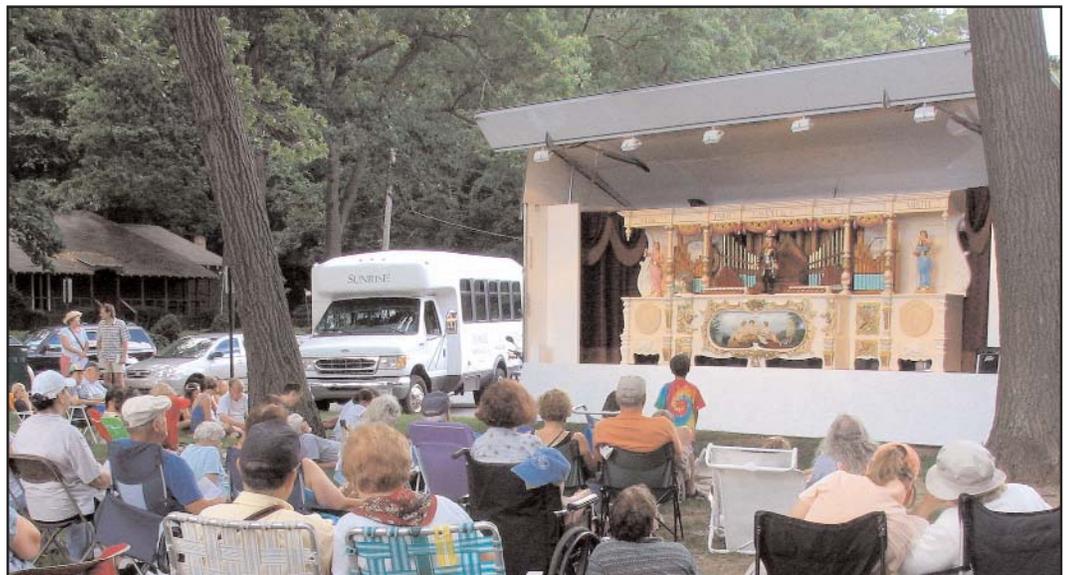


Figure 12. The Diamond Jubilee Organ as she looks today. Painting will be completed this winter and a new proscenium in the coming year. Photo: ©Judith Canty Graves 2008

Roger Wiegand is a molecular biologist who works on discovering new drugs to treat malaria at the Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT. His elective time is spent with organ concerts, and building and restoration activities in his shop. He enjoys playing tuba in the community and COAA bands.