

Perlee Performs at Walt Disney Concert Hall

Jack M. Conway

I was referred to the Walt Disney Concert Hall (Los Angeles) for their “Toy Theatre Festival” held on June 14 and 15, 2008. What is Toy Theatre? “Toy Theatre is a genre of puppetry that enacts plays using two dimensional rod puppets in miniature theatres. It’s origins date to early 19th century England, where drawings depicting a proscenium theatre, characters, and scenery were printed, reproduced, and sold packaged with play scripts for a penny plain, two pence colored. Families—including children and adults—assembled the stages and performed Toy Theatre productions in their living rooms as home entertainment.” The festival brought together acclaimed puppetry artists from all over the world.



Figure 1. The author hand-cranking his diminutive 22-key Perlee organ.

The festival organizers asked for photos of the organ. On seeing the photos they hired me to perform (Figure 1). They later said, “Since your organ looks like a Toy Theatre, it was a perfect fit for the event, adding a musical dimension to the festivities.”

I was asked to perform in the garden where the crafts area was set up. Tables were staffed to show families how to create their own theatres and puppets to take home. A cardboard box formed the main body of the stage. A “Penny Plain” proscenium was glued to the front of the box. To make the rod puppets, preprinted characters were glued to dowels.



Figure 2. A Perlee book label. Wording under the Perlee address is translated as:

Dealer in all types of crank-organs
Rental and repair - Installation
Supplier of carton-music for organs

My Perlee hand organ was probably built in the early 1960s by Gijs Perlee, Draaiorgels, Westerstraat 119, Amsterdam-C. On page 849 of the Bowers “Encyclopedia” a page from the Fair Organ Preservation Society publication *The Key Frame*. is reproduced. It says, “The instruments ranged from the small 23-key organs which The Perlee Family make for export to various countries . . .” (Figure 2).

“Since your organ looks like a Toy Theatre, it was a perfect fit for the event, adding a musical dimension to the festivities.”

A mechanical music expert once told me that Perlee never made an organ smaller than 25-key. Then I told



Figure 3. 22-key Perlee organ with the cover remove—you can count 22 keys.

him I had a 22-key Perlee. I have seen and played a 25 Keyless Perlee. Mine is a 22-keyed organ. You can count them for yourself (Figures 3).

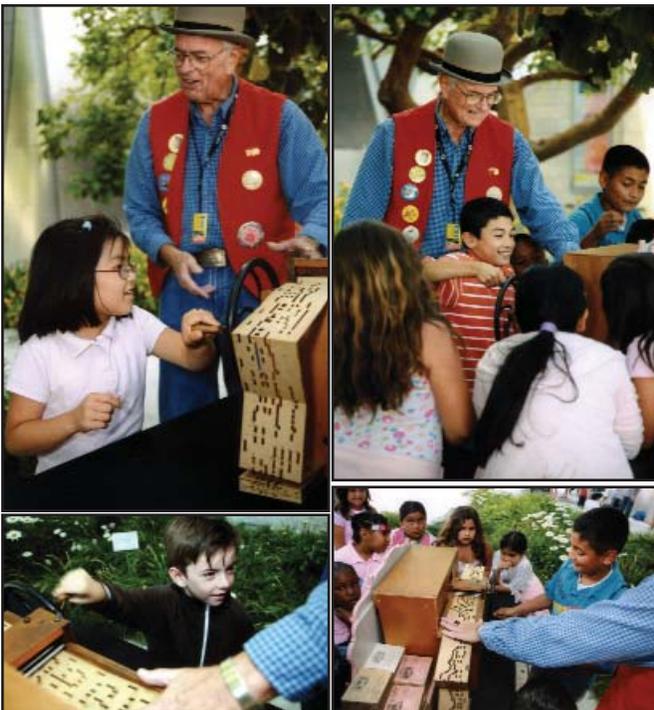


Figure 4. A group of interested youngsters were around the organ most of the day.

I took 20 music books and cycled through them three times each day. I played for three hours each day. Or should I say the children played the organ for three hours each day. Once I asked the first child if they would like to crank the organ, that was the end of my cranking. When I asked who would like to crank the organ, all the

hands shot up. Then a seemingly unending line formed and the organ played to the end of my three-hour time slot each day (Figure 4).

When asked, I would explain how the organ works, showing the book, key frame, and pipes. One young lady, who I thought might be too small, cranked the entire book at a constant and correct speed. Some of the boys thought they were in a race. Some would tire quickly. One locked up at the top of the wheel and tried to go backwards. Music books don't like that.

I had a terrific time and it appeared that the children did also. I received nice thank you notes and a very nice set of pictures of the performance. When you get the chance to perform, take an instrument to a festival and share it with the public. (Figures 5 & 6).

Photos (1—4) provided by Walt Disney Concert Hall Staff Photographer and 5-6 by Hope Rider. The author wishes to thank Robbie Rhodes for translation of the organ book material.



Figure 5 (Above). A 22-key Perlee on a Holland street.

Figure 6 (below). Hope Rider with her 22-key Perlee.



Jack Conway started collecting with his grandfather's Edison Gem Phonograph. He never left Knott's Berry Farm or Disneyland with a coin left in his pocket. He obtained his first player piano in 1962 and the instruments have become larger and louder. He loves to take his Wurlitzer 105, Wurlitzer 146-A with bells, and Tangley CA-43 to rallies.

Selected photos of Gijsert Perlee and his smallest street organ



A photo of Gijbert Perlee and a 22-key organ. The photo and narrative below are from the #3, 1967 issue of the *House Organ*, published by the Vestal Press, Vestal NY. Within the article "Automatic Music An International Hobby" Harvey Roehl writes:

Many Americans and others are interested in purchasing the old street organs, and great efforts are now being made by many Dutchmen who love them to prevent them from leaving their country. Mr. Perlee is helping to solve this problem by building and selling this miniature organ, for about \$550. It is hand-cranked, and sounds perfectly delightful, using the small music books such as Mr. Perlee is holding. About 50 tunes are available, and they sell for something like \$2.50 each (two come with each instrument). Ten of these organs were under construction at the time the pictures were taken.



"Among the prominent customers from the Far East are King Bumiphol and Queen Sirikit from Thailand. For this 20-key instrument, King Bumiphol himself composed some Thai tunes."

Photo: "Prominente Drehorgel-Liebhaber"
Musikhistorische Gesellschaft, Journal #1, 1978



"Gijbert Perlee's eldest son assembling a street organ. In the background can be seen the stencil rolls for the music rolls."

Photo: "Prominente Drehorgel-Liebhaber"
Musikhistorische Gesellschaft, Journal #1, 1978



"Gijbert Perlee finalizing the assembly of his small, hand-turned street organ."

Photo: "Prominente Drehorgel-Liebhaber"
Musikhistorische Gesellschaft, Journal #1, 1978