

A Well-traveled Gasparini Finds A Home

Gerry Bay

I rushed my wife, Gale Bay, to the hospital at 3:00 a.m. Suffering from a terrible chest cold, she was having trouble breathing. We were in Tucson, AZ at the time packing up my 90 year old mother's house to move her back to Rhode Island so that she could be near us. The night was crystal clear and the stars shone brightly. At that moment, anything relating to mechanical music was very far from my mind.

They rolled her into the hospital emergency room and began hooking her up to all kinds of IV's and instruments. I was very concerned but as dawn approached, the news was positive. It was just the cold and not anything more serious like a heart attack. Suddenly, a doctor rushed in with a portable phone in his hands and said, "Mr. Bay, it's for you. It's London calling."

London? In my concern for Gale, I had completely forgotten that this morning was the day of the auction at Sotheby's (for a beautiful Gasparini fairground organ that we had greatly admired). The bidding was fast and furious but my heart was not in it as I looked over at Gale with tubes running all over the place and I passed. We almost immediately began to regret the decision.

At the time, we were very new collectors. Several months earlier, we had seen the organ in a Sotheby's auction catalog. We fell in love with it—it was the prettiest instrument we had seen, with a female band conductor and two bell ringers on either side (**Figure 1**). However, it needed a major restoration and we knew of no one who could accomplish the work. It was also listed at a rather high reserve and we felt we had no busi-

ness bidding on it at that price, when it was in London and we didn't even know how to get it over here, let alone restore it.

However, we noted that the organ did not sell at the auction. So, when it came up for auction a few months later at a greatly reduced price, we thought we would go for it and figure out what to do later. We kept looking at the pictures in the catalog and were just plain crazy in love with it. So, here we were in the hospital room hours later, as Gale was recovering, kicking ourselves for not following through with our dream and buying the Gasparini. We were really down.

I made up my mind that I would track down the high bidder to see if he would consider selling the instrument to us for a quick profit. I was able to identify the high bidder and I wrote him a nice letter. I waited for a response but I never heard anything from the gentleman. So "our" beautiful Gasparini was in someone else's hands and we might never see it again.

As we became more familiar with mechanical music, we were fortunate to visit many of the major collectors and to go on Ron Bopp's "Bumblin' Bruder Tour." Invariably, Gale and I would marvel at the fairground organs that we saw. But we would often say to each other when we saw an organ of comparable size to the Gasparini, "Pretty—but not as nice as the Gasparini."

Then two years after the auction, I was at the MBSI convention and asked a friend to introduce me to the collector who owned the organ, Mark Yaffee. I met Mark and began to tell our tale of interest in the organ. Mark interrupted me and said,



Figure 1. The 52-key Gasparini fair organ as it sits in Gerry and Gale Bay's music room. At one time in its colorful history it sat in Madam and Monsieur Farkas' Doll Museum in Baden, France



Figure 2. The French Franc used as a washer.

“You’re the guy who wrote me that letter? I’m so happy to meet you. My two-year old daughter ate the letter and I lost your contact information!” He went on to say that he had many projects going and that if we really wanted the organ and would restore it, he would sell it to us at his cost. A handshake sealed the deal and the organ was ours. We will always be grateful to Mark. There are so many truly fine people in this hobby of ours and Mark is surely one of the best.



Figure 3. Newspapers of the date of manufacture line the pump.

well as a French Franc that had been made into a washer (Figure 2). He also found newspapers in the pump that had been used to seal leaks (Figure 3). They made for very interesting reading!

We tried to research the history of the organ but without much success. We know that it ended up in Madam and Monsieur Farkas’ Doll Museum in Baden, France where it was displayed for its beautiful façade and figures but it never played. Unfortunately, the façade top had been cut down so that it would fit in a room. However, we found enough pieces of the old top and some pictures so that we were pretty sure what the top looked like. Ron and Sue Schmuck made a replica top that looks terrific.

By this time, we had become acquainted with several restorers. We selected Ron Schmuck to restore the organ and to put a MIDI interface into it to play some marvelous music from Alan Pell. At this point, the organ was really well-traveled. It went from a small town in France to London to Mark’s restorer in CA to Canada and eventually, it would go to our home in Jamestown, RI.

Ron began a complete restoration and in the process, he found the date 1892 inside the organ, as

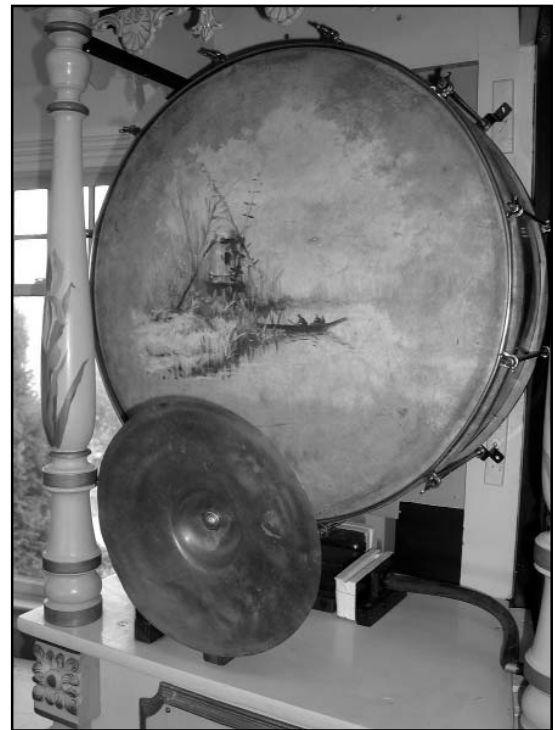


Figure 4. Details of the bass drum.

As the restoration commenced, Gale and I realized that we had a problem. The organ was too big for our house and we had no place to put it. We met with our architect and decided that the only thing we could do was to build a new “music room” to house the Gasparini and to leave space for other instruments. Unfortunately, Gale would lose her favorite guest bedroom in the process. Until we acquired the Gasparini, Gale said that there was no way we would touch her favorite bedroom. However, she was madly in love with the Gasparini so we built a new addition to the house.



Figure 5. A bell ringer takes on a most interesting look.

And so today, the Gasparini has come back to life after many years of neglect and she is playing proudly again both with books and with the MIDI system. Ron Schmuck’s restoration was perfect and his expertise with MIDI is outstanding. Our collection is now very diverse with orchestrions, music boxes, automata, etc. But by far and away, the major crowd pleaser is the Gasparini.

The Gasparini organ and the remainder of the Bay collection can be viewed on their website, www.channelbells.com/music-2.html. In addition to collecting mechanical music, the Bays actively race and cruise sailboats.