

Play It Again, Gaviman . . . Big Bertha Volumes 1 to 4, Hidden Treasures and Overtures

The first European-built band organ that this reviewer fully experienced was the instrument that Paul Eakins named "Big Bertha." An Audio Fidelity LP, AFSD6145, came home with me in 1967, disrupting the remainder of a working Saturday afternoon for my mother. It was a revelation for me, having seen an altered 89-key Gavioli for just a few moments and knowing only the Wurlitzer 165 as another style of organ. Here was a big, throaty machine playing lots of snappy, older American tunes, most of which I quickly came to know. The LP jacket notes suggested that the organ was of Limonaire manufacture and had been converted to 82-key North Tonawanda paper rolls. It had 369 pipes, two drums, a cymbal and two mechanical bell-ringers, along with the namesake band-mistress. It was used on a Grand Rapids, Michigan carousel with two other big instruments and required some 2500 man-hours, over a four-year period, 1963 to 1966, to restore to playing condition. That was a really intriguing story, to say the least. One new tune was released later on a 1969 LP, AFSD 6203 "The Emperor and His Harem," and three more on a 1972 LP, Eakins 5169 "Continental Beauties."

In 1978 Eakins converted Big Bertha to play Wurlitzer 165 rolls, adding eighteen bells, double castanets and a triangle to fill out the scale. Some of the unused pipework was deleted and the registration modified. The original playing format was stated to have been a 90-key barrel, followed by a conversion to cardboard books. There was then a rebuild to endless 82-key North Tonawanda rolls, followed by 82-key "Artizan" rolls (87 keys in the actual scale). The organ's playing home had been the Loeff carousel at Ramona Park, from whence it was sold to owners in Gulf Shores, Alabama. The sound of Big Bertha had changed, the exuberance of the large organ was diminished in moving downward from 87 to 69 keys. Two LPs of the modified Big Bertha were issued by Eakins, numbers 5208 and 5209.

Guests at Paul Eakins attractions in

Sikeston and St. Louis, Missouri were treated to the sounds from Big Bertha until Eakins decided to retire and later reduce his holdings. Walt DisneyWorld was chosen to be a fitting place for the instruments that he had collected and carefully rebuilt. Several Eakins instruments, including Big Bertha, went to Florida in a 1977 deal. It was taken on tour in the late 1970s as a goodwill ambassador for WDW, appeared in the 1982 opening of Epcot Center and was utilized for World Showcase programs. Eventually Big Bertha, in 1988, after further rebuilding, was installed high up on a wall niche in the Park Fare Restaurant within the Grand Floridian Resort. It was there, in 1993, that I finally saw and heard what she had become, an audio bird in a gilded cage.

The big sound of the album first heard some 26 years before spun in my mind. If only there had been other recordings made of the organ back in 1966. Maybe there were some other tapes to enjoy. Well, it turned out that there were, some from 1967, but it awaited for Eakins grandson, Chris Carlisle, and the ease of compact disk reproduction, before they would be released. Their availability has sparked this "afterglow" review.

Big Bertha is a bit of a mystery organ. The French manufacture assignment could not be substantiated by the research done to date, nor could the instrument be assigned to another builder by any rationale. Unfortunately, Arthur Prinsen, who had arranged many books for other Eakins organs, did not recall how the attribution had been developed because he had not furnished books for the organ. The spreads of upright brass trumpets are not a feature that we've found on French organs. They appear to have been Germanic in style, as seen on organs made in Berlin and Waldkirch, or by Wellershaus, and also infrequently



seen on small deKleist instruments and German orchestrions. Family records failed to reveal the organ's origin and a rebuilt case probably explains the absence of the usual barrel mechanism keyhole opening in the side. The North Tonawanda Musical Instrument Works did the modification to rolls because their name was still present on the entablature of the facade when acquired by Eakins.

Despite the shortcomings of manufacturing knowledge, there is no doubt that Big Bertha was an early band organ in the United States. It was a large barrel organ, perhaps 90 keys, typifying the larger such machines that were distributed here new about 1895 and second hand through about 1905. The niches were separate from the main case and were attached to it. The facade style was of the panel type, with individual carved ornaments placed within the panels. Columns, instead of mechanical figures, supported the entablature.

Big Bertha has a military style specification that sounds best when playing a good march, like Colonel Bogey, where the trumpets and trombones are heard to good advantage. The organ was built before violins became a common melody voice. The pipework is very adequate, the number being slightly more than in some 89 no. 4 scale Gavioli book organs. The conversion to books would have been done sometime 1907-1915, likely by Christopher Eifler, who had also converted the accompanying barrel organs, a 100-key deKleist later known as "Sadie Mae" and a 94-key Gavioli that was later named "Madame Laura." The Eifler

names survived on those two organs until the end of their ride service. They were all on the big circa 1905 three-abreast Charles I. D. Looff carousel at Ramona Park until closure proceedings started in 1949. The McElwee family that owned the ride and organs advertised them up for sale in 1955. They were sold to Lloyd Burge, Sr., who in turn sold the Gavioli to Don McElhenny, proprietor of CeMar Amusement Park in Marion, Iowa and the other two to Paul Eakins. Later the Gavioli was also acquired by Eakins.

The four disks are noteworthy for being the only ones issued to date featuring the 82-key North Tonawanda roll. The only larger American roll playing organ recorded is the Wurlitzer 180, now in the Jasper and Marian Sanfilippo collection. Hopefully a recording of one of the three surviving original 82-key North Tonawanda instruments will be issued some day so that the full intentions of the arrangers can be appreciated. These recordings are fine, but Big Bertha's pipework differs from that of the formal North Tonawanda specification. The arrangements are not excessively busy, they seem suited to skating and carousel riding and are not concert organ showpieces. There seems to be a lot of unison playing and sonorous sounds coming from the rolls. Frills, trills and other embellishments are at a minimum, but there are several instances where one arranger played a few tricks with the arrangement.

Volume 1 features three standard overtures, *Poet and Peasant*, *Merry Widow* and *William Tell* along with *Glow Worm Idyl* by Paul Lincke (last three on AFSD6203 and 5169). There are also ten popular tunes, marches, waltzes and polkas played on another machine other than Big Bertha. There are twenty bands on Volume 2, mostly popular tunes, of which four were issued previously (AFSD6145). Volume 3 continues with nineteen popular tunes, fourteen of which are entirely new issues (five on AFSD6145). The last volume, number four, has 23 tracks, comprised of six repeats and seventeen new songs, marches, popular songs, a general mix of North Tonawanda arrangements. The playing time on the four volumes, respectively, are: 24:47 (Big Bertha time, only); 57:42; 63:44; and 59:10.

The recording technique was very good, there being a pleasing balance between the pipework and the percussion, each complementing the other. The warm, somewhat buzzy trumpets come through nicely, with certain passages highlighted by some solo speaking pipes as called for by the arranger. The piccolos are frequently heard but are not excessively shrill. There are some transient bad spots, presumably the result of the tapes being forty years old. One can hear some cuing of the roll identification on one cut and some speaking can be heard elsewhere, but none of it is wholly distracting from the enjoyment of the disks. Other

than an infrequent episode, the general quality of the recordings is very good. They are certainly far better than the usual poor cassette dubbings made years ago of organs that no longer exist.

The disks come in economical paper sleeves but readily fit into the standard jewel case. There is no liner card or notes. The tunes are listed on an applique adhered to the disk. Each disk is \$12.00 plus shipping and handling.

It's the 40th anniversary of Paul Eakins acquisition of Big Bertha. He rebuilt these big instruments long before they were generally appreciated by Americans. His high quality workmanship was undertaken when carousel operators were junking or burning equally large, or even larger European organs. It was an era when rolls, books, scales and other things that are readily available today were not known to exist. We highly recommend that you revel in all of his contributions to the band organs that we all enjoy today by listening to these great recordings.

The disks can be ordered directly from Chris Carlisle, 835 Woodruff Avenue, Sikeston, MO 63801, or by PayPal to his e-mail address of Carly@semo.net. Further information is also available at the website, www.pauleakinsnickelodeonmusic.com.

Fred Dahlinger, Jr.

A Correction!

COAA member, Craig Smith, correctly pointed out the error in Figure 4 of Tom Griffith's article *16th Internationales Drehorgelfest* which was included on pages 24-25 of Issue #17 of the *Carousel Organ*. The printer's computer took the bottom portion of the photograph and slid it over so that it was, well, it was all there but in different pieces!

As Craig poignantly wrote, this may have been a case of Hal O'Rourke playing an organ that had a transposing bass. Well, apologies go to Tom and Hal for this uncontrollable error and for those of you that wish to see the photograph in its correct manner, it is here—on the right. For those that wish to see the computer-mangled photograph, see page 24 of the last issue of the *Carousel Organ*.

And, thanks to Craig for catching this error.

