

## The Mechanical “Savoyard”

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For years I have been fascinated by Polyphon’s “Savoyard,” a disc-playing musical box housed in a cranked organ case which is supported by a scissor-type stand and cranked by a nearly full-sized terra cotta grinder. As my interest in street organs accelerated I became more puzzled by the lack of appreciation and study of these rare objects from the organ grinder point of view. The disc portion of the “Savoyard” has been covered by Steve Boehck in his article “Polyphon Savoyard” which appeared in the Autumn 1999 issue of the MBSI’s *Journal of Mechanical Music*.



Figure 1. An 1894 Polyphon “Savoyard” advertisement in the *Zeitschrift für Instrumentenbau*.

### The mechanical “Savoyards”

One of the earlier advertisements for the Polyphon “Savoyard” appeared in the 1894 issue of *Zeitschrift für Instrumentenbau*, “a newspaper for instrument builders” (Figure 1). An example of this instrument is seen in Figure 2. The Polyphon firm made two versions of the “Savoyard” and this was the first and smaller version. It used an 11 ¼” disc where as the larger version (Figure 3) used a 15 ¾” Polyphon disc and will be covered later.



Figure 2. The smaller version of the Polyphon “Savoyard”. The organ is supported by a scissor-style stand.



figure 3. The larger version of the “Savoyard” features a performance of three moving monkeys.

that the disc is operated and replaced in a vertical position (Figure 4). Disc storage is handy as it is in the base of the scissor stand (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Opening the case of the “Savoyard” reveals the single disc-playing mechanism.

A left-rear view of the “Savoyard” reveals the figure’s right hand which turns the crank as the music is played



Figure 5. Disc storage is conveniently located in the base of the stand.

(Figure 6). Also apparent is the area of a missing coin drop chute as well as the small coin collection box below. Of interest is the cluster of grapes hanging from the grinder's left coat pocket. In reviewing Figure 2 it is noted that the winding crank is inserted in the right, lower portion front organ case.



Figure 6. A rear view shows the grinder's hand cranking the organ. Note the interesting detail of the grapes hanging from his left vest pocket.

The larger of the two “Savoyards” has somewhat of a different look in that the organ case is larger and features a stage where three monkeys perform along with the music (Figure 7). The central figure is more mechanical as it plays a violin—the outside two monkeys dance a circle but play no instrument. Whereas the smaller “Savoyards” feature a dish on top of the organ (used for either holding a supply of money to operate the unit, or perhaps, in some instances, used to entice further donations) the animated “Savoyard” has a dish with a slot in the middle which acts as the beginning of the coin chute.



Figure 7. The stage of the larger “Savoyard” revealing the three mechanical monkeys. The central figure plays a violin while the musical box is activated.

### Why a music box?

Getting back to an area of concern for these mechanical “Savoyards” is one question that has puzzled me: “Why a music box?” Why not an organ? It would have made more sense to have marketed an organ grinder cranking a real organ. Or, maybe not—maybe the Polyphon company was just thinking of another way to market its disc music movements. After all, this was an eye-catching piece of mechanical music.

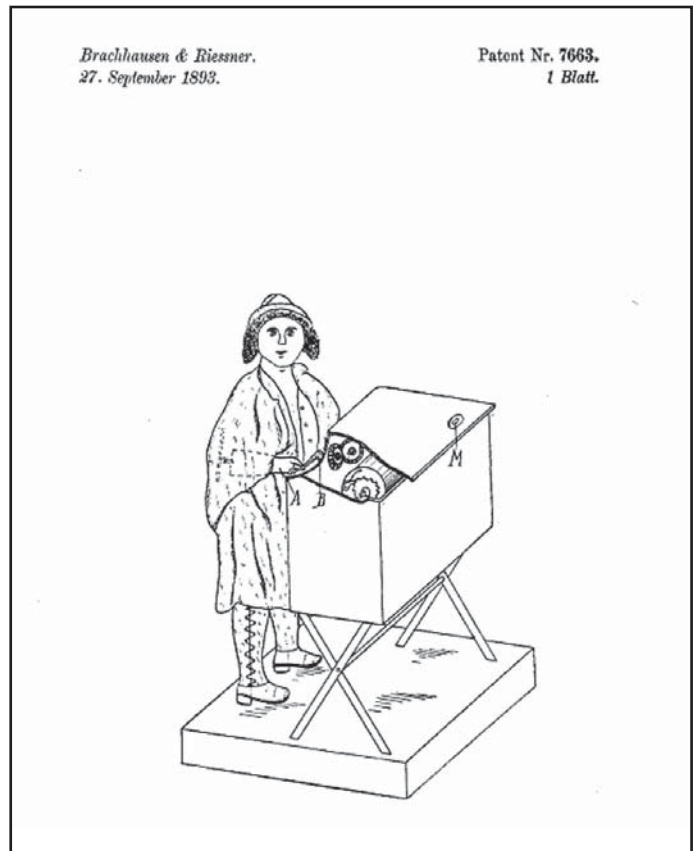


Figure 8. Brachhausen & Riessner Swiss Patent #7663 applied for in 1893. The patent relates specifically to a “Barrel organ-like musical automaton.”



This discussion could stop at this point had it not been for a patent (#7663) applied by Brachhausen & Riessner in 1893. This patent is not available from the USPTO (United States Patent and Trade Office) but rather from the Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft (Swiss patent office). It was approved on September 27, 1893 as “Musikautomat in Form einer eine Drehorgel drehenden Figure” (Musical automaton in the form of a figure turning a barrel organ). The description of the patent and its claim follows (refer to **Figure 8**):

In the invention which is the subject of this paper, a figure has been installed in front of a mechanically driven, barrel organ-like musical automaton. In a movable and crank-like way, an arm (A) of the figure has been connected to part (B), which is moved by the driving mechanism of the musical instrument, in such a way that when the musical automaton is in operation, the impression is created that the automaton is actually operated by the figure.

The figure can be manufactured as to look like a Savoyard boy or in another suitable form, either standing, sitting or in any other position. The activation of the driving mechanism of the musical automaton is triggered by a specific coin that has to be inserted into slot (M).

**Patent-Claim:**

Musical automaton in the form of a figure which gives the impression to operate a barrel organ-like musical instrument; to this purpose, an arm (A) of the figure is connected in a movable and crank-like way to a part (B) which is driven by the driving mechanism of the musical instrument; in addition, an activation mechanism triggered by the insertion of a coin is used to put the automaton into action.

It now becomes clear that at the time of a first advertisement in the Zeitschrift für Instrumentenbau (**Figure 9**) for the Polyphon “Savoyard” the company was also considering a unit that actually played a barrel organ as well as a music box.

Did the Polyphon firm ever produce such a unit? One would think “probably not” since no collection is known to exhibit such a piece. However, I recently found an interesting “Savoyard” for sale by a Florida dealer. Raphael Cole of Davie, Florida has been kind enough to provide me with some information and photos of this unique piece. Advertised as a “Savoyard Organ Grinder” on his web page he elaborates by saying this is a “Savoyard” playing a 7-tune antique organ (**Figure 10**).



Figure 10. A recent “Savoyard” playing a 7-tune reed organ..



Figure 9. An 189e Polyphon “Savoyard” advertisement in the Zeitschrift für Instrumentenbau.

The figure and case is similar in most aspects to that of a disc-playing “Savoyard” in the Sanfilippo collection (**back cover**). Close inspection of both units reveals the figure’s artist name, J. Roroort and the inscription “Vervielfältigung Vorbehalten” -- Reproduction Prohibited (**Figure 11**).

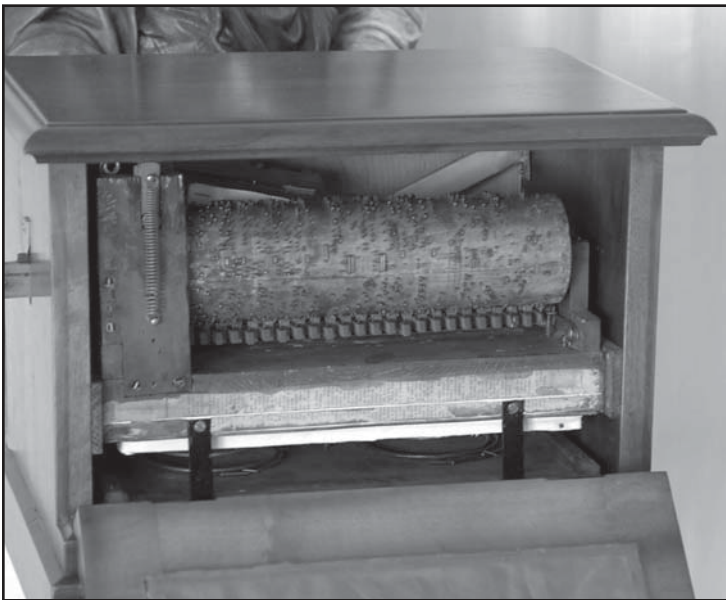


Figure 11. The inscription on the base of the “Savoyard” in Figure 10.



Figure 12 (above). A typical “Savoyard” case for the small disc-playing mechanism.

Figure 13 (below). When opened the barrel organ mechanism is revealed.



The organ case does look very nice, maybe even new, but the details (Figure 12) are similar if not identical what is in Figures 2 and 11. The surprise comes, however, in opening up the front of the organ case (Figure 13). No music box movement is found but rather, a pinned barrel with what appears to be a reed organ mechanism. The springs necessary for the reservoir are clearly visible at the bottom of the unit. The fingers all line up under the barrel, the opposite ends becoming pallets for a reed organ.

Is this original or a conversion? Closer inspection would be needed but it certainly lends some credence to the suggestion that perhaps a “Savoyard” organ box might exist in addition to the “Savoyard” music boxes. Even if this example represents a salvage restoration (where the music box movement was replaced by a reed organ) it illustrates what might have transpired had the Polyphon company decided to follow its 1893 patent application.



Figure 14. An example of a contemporary organ grinder actually playing a working book-operated hand organ. This example was crafted by Franz Ohrlein (Mainz, Germany).

Collectors today have had the chance to own one of a preciously few-made contemporary grinder/organ combinations offered by Franz Ohrlein of Mainz, Germany. (Figure 14). The organ is operated with paper books and seems to have filled the void left by the Polyphon company.

#### Why a Savoyard “Savoyard”?

Continuing my questioning of the various aspects of this mechanical device I wonder why the Polyphon firm would even consider using the Savoyard personality in one of their fine disc musical boxes. In simple terms a



Savoyard is an itinerant musician, or for that matter, any type of wandering worker from Savoy (an area near Italy and France). Savoyards were not necessarily the most, or even modestly respected members of society.

One of multiple examples that are in the literature is an internet discussion (“Earwigs & a leech; Organ Grinders in Victorian Cities” – circa 1864) by a Mr. Ross (<http://ideltigers.wordpress.com/2008/01/24/earwigs-and-a-leech-organ-grinders-in-victorian-cities>) that illustrates the all-too-common perception of the organ grinder. In this monologue he notes the:

“Strange and sad case of John Leech, the artist who provided cartoons for Punch, and Illustrations for his friend Dickens' A Christmas Carol, and who allegedly suffered death by organ-grinding.”

As a caricaturist he [Leech] considered “the organ grinder to be a chief menace. This figure was referred to as a “Savoyard”, although street musicians might have arrived in London from all parts of Switzerland, Italy & France.” Mr. Ross went on to say:

“Leech was an invalid, suffering from a heart condition and nervous temperament. He seems to have been unfortunate enough to possess an extreme sensitivity to noise, explaining to a friend that his demise was caused by “the incessant vexation of organ grinding, and the need of doing my work while the wretched instruments of torture were, from different points, turning out their discordant notes into my brain.”” He died two months later.

Mr. Leech’s displeasure of organ grinders appeared in **Figure 15** entitled “Sketch from a Study Window.” Further discussion regarding Leech’s feelings and his last work included:

The weirdly exaggerated scene shows an otherwise quite road literally crawling with Organ grinders, as if the street were the scene of some ghastly infestation. A single insect is also included in the middle of the street, as if to signal the insect (earwig?) nature of the musicians.

That being said I bring up again the questioning of the reasoning of the Polyphon firm to use a Savoyard for their unit. I queried several experts in the field of mechanical music and will note their responses. Q. David Bowers responded that he felt that the organ grinder figure simply added visual interest as “such were a familiar sight in European streets at the time.” He went on to say that he didn’t think these particularly good sellers, based on their rarity today. Arthur Ord-Hume felt that these were intended for the children’s portion of the market. Specialist collector Al Choffnes felt that the use of the Savoyard figure would attract attention of potential patrons who could see the organ grinder turn the crank.

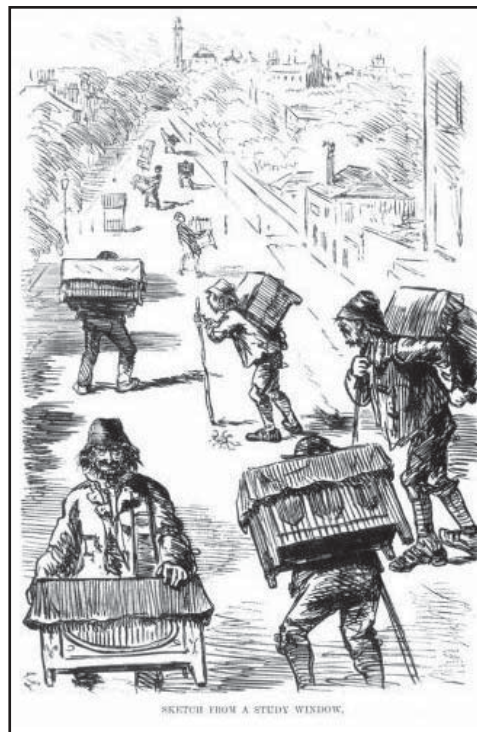


Figure 15. Leech’s “Sketch from a Study Window.”

commercial trade: hotels, resorts, restaurants. And, of course, it was coin-operated to convince the proprietor that it would pay for itself.”

### Summary

Exploring the existence and make-up of the “Savoyard” provides insight into the advertising and mechanical complexities revolving around late 19th century Polyphon music box production. Inquiring why an organ was not used instead of a musical box raises interesting questions. The answers may never be known.

I have queried several European experts on the existence of an organ-cased “Savoyard” and none are aware of any. It may have never occurred but the existence of Patent #7663 certainly questions that production was considered and possibly done in small quantities.

I wish to thank Björn Isebaert for translation of the Swiss Patent #7663. I thank Q. David Bowers, Arthur Ord-Hume, Al Choffnes and Angelo Rulli for their help in formulating thoughts about the purpose of the Polyphon “Savoyard.”

### Photo Credits:

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Franz Oehrlein: Figure 14