

## Hark to the Music of the Reelmakers!

Steven K. Vernon

“Hark! ‘tis the music of the reel...” – Thomas Tod Stoddart, 1835

“...’whirr,—rr—rr,’ went the reel!...what music is more welcome?” – William Cartwright, 1874

“...the whirring music of the reel, so dear to the angler’s ear.” – Anna McCoy, 1895

What is the audience hearing during these highly acclaimed reel recitals? Is it the deep-throated bass of worn gears? The mellifluous tenor of a hyperactive level wind? The coloratura soprano of spool journals spinning in worn bearings? The *prestissimo* percussion of a strong click? The *allegretto* percussion of spool endplay? Some reels probably can sound like an entire orchestra when a fish is hauling out line.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise that some designers, makers, and sellers of fishing reels have also been involved professionally with the music world, rather than merely singing in the bathtub or strumming with the family after Sunday supper. Here are a few who inspired, or perhaps were inspired by, atonal reel music.

Rees and Laban Lewis, father and son, began making harps in New York City in 1846. By 1852, their shop, R. & L. Lewis, was also manufacturing fishing reels. They made a variety of New York-style reels, both multiplying and single-action, as well as harps, until the family moved to a small town in the Pocono Mountains in the late 1860s. They opened a hotel there, and Laban continued to make fishing reels and other tackle items.



*A harp built by R. & L. Lewis.*

In 1852, Brinsmaid, Brother & Company was selling “the greatest variety of Musical Instruments” and fishing reels, including reels of their own make, in Burlington, Vt. This mix of wares was nothing new for the business, which had been established two decades earlier.

The Marsters brothers, George and James, were involved in the music trade for decades, while they sold sporting goods in Brooklyn, N.Y. James was teaching music in 1860, and the brothers listed their business in 1864 as “music,” which leads me to believe they were selling and/or manufacturing musical instruments. Later, they began to advertise their dealing in fishing

### Fishing and Hunting.

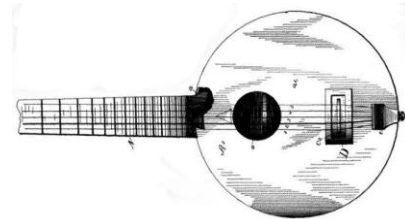
Rifles, Guns, Pistols, Wads, Caps, Flasks, &c. ; Rods, Flies, Spoons, Swivels, Hooks ; American Reels of our own make and treble Hooks of our own importation.

### MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS.

Beautiful Church and Parlor Organs or Seraphines, with and without stops, Melodeons, Guitars, Banjos, Violins, Flutes, Bugles and the greatest variety of Musical Instruments, and all kinds of Musical Merchandise. Instruction Books for all Instruments, at low prices.

*Two sections of a large, 1852 Brinsmaid ad touting reels and instruments.*

tackle. In his 1875 catalog, James devoted a full page to musical instruments, stating, “This having been one of my specialities since 1857...” In 1889, George patented a dulcetina, a banjo-like instrument. Three years later, James was listed in a Brooklyn classified directory as a manufacturer of musical instruments. The Marsters brothers were in the music business longer than they were in the tackle business.



*A drawing of George Marsters’ dulcetina, patented in 1889.*

Edward P. Follett is best known as the designer and manufacturer of the eponymous side-mounted skeleton reel. He also invented the rod-and-automatic-reel combo that would be sold by the White-Ross Manufacturing Company. When he enlisted in the New York 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment in 1861, his first rank was Second Bugler. In June, 1864, Sergeant Follett was captured at Stony Creek, Va., but he escaped from the POW camp at Aiken’s Landing the following February. He was mustered out in 1865 as a second lieutenant.

In the mid-1870s, Follett and Edward P. Gilbert made stoves and tinware for a few years in Rochester, N.Y., but in 1877, Follett was employed by R. Fischer & Co., which sold and repaired pianos and organs. On



*Both Follett and O'Bannon might have posed like this.*

Main Street in August, 1879, Follett shot John A. Barnum because Barnum was “living with Follett’s wife.” Barnum’s wounds were not serious, and I have no idea whether or not Follett was prosecuted. He continued to be listed as an inventor in Rochester directories. Several more years passed before Follett would begin to make fishing reels.

In 1863, Taylor O’Bannon was working in Mattoon, Ill., when he enlisted in the 17<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Illinois Cavalry, as a trumpeter. He was only sixteen at the time. After the Civil War, he would become a bartender in Indianapolis, Ind., before teaming with Warren Ohaver to patent a

reel in 1882. The reel would be marketed by the American Reel Company, which was organized by the two inventors and three local bigwigs.

It took Harrison H. Heskett a long time to find his calling. In 1860, he was a twenty-year-old wagon-maker apprentice in Liberty, Ohio. A decade later, he was a jeweler in LeRoy, Ill., where he lived with his wife and son. By 1874, he was back in Ohio, working as a jeweler in Columbus. Around 1875, he appears to have changed gears. As he neared forty years of age, Heskett began to make violins, initially setting up shop in Columbus. Sometime between 1883 and 1887, he and his family moved to Minneapolis, Minn., where he became the city’s only violin maker for years.

In 1893, Heskett patented an interesting reel with a bail-operated brake. It anticipated the Rabbeth anti-backlash bail brake that would be found on South Bend casting reels for decades.

When George A. Young patented a reel with a lever-operated freespool clutch in 1906, he was making clarinets at the C.G. Conn Company in Elkhart, Ind. The company has been one of the most important



*A C.G. Conn clarinet, the type made by Young.*

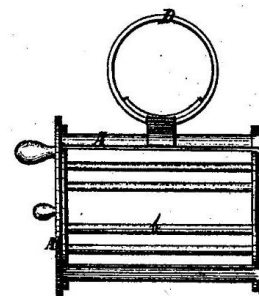


*Young may be in this photo of the Conn clarinet makers shop.*

instrument makers in the U.S. since its founding in 1875. Young was promoted to foreman there by 1912, though the factory had been destroyed by fire in 1910. Perhaps as a result of the fading popularity of metal clarinets, he switched paths and by 1917 was selling groceries at the store of Young & Robbins in Elkhart. By 1922, the business was Young & Coleman, and Young was the vice-president of Sunlight Baking Company. Young was still a grocer when he died in 1943. Ironically, Charles Conn had been a grocer when he began to make instruments.

As a brassworker, Young probably could have made the reel himself or he might have had connections to some shop that could have made it. The reel probably made it to market, as at least one example is in a collection.

During the nineteenth century, musical instruments were introduced more frequently into American homes. Among them were instruments, mostly keyboard instruments, whose tones were produced by vibrating metal strips called reeds, which were vibrated by air flow. Other types of instruments used plucks or hammers to vibrate strings. Usually, a bellows produced the air flow, often operated by the performer’s foot. Such instruments included the melodeon, the reed organ, and a host of machines known mostly by their brand names.

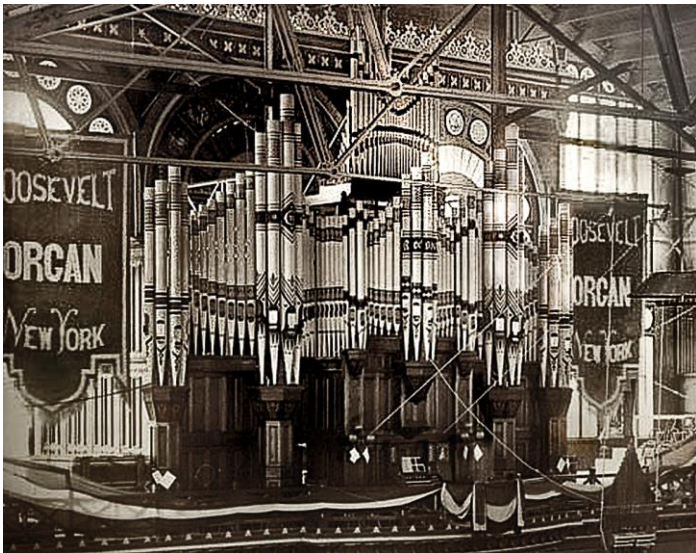


*An 1869 patent drawing showing the pillared, ventilated arbor in the Ross design.*



Beginning in 1859, James Ross made melodeons in the factory of George A. Prince & Co., Buffalo, N.Y., for a few years. The company was a major manufacturer of reed organs and melodeons. Following the Civil War, the rising popularity of the piano helped to cause the company's closing in 1871. Meanwhile, Ross adjusted his sights and invented a single-action reel with a ventilated spool in 1869. From the late 1870s on, Ross would supervise the Ross Patent Refrigerator Company.

Thomas Winans, co-inventor of the first patented spinning reel, became one of the richest men in the U.S. by building railroads in Russia. From 1873 through 1876, he was granted at least nine patents for pipe organs. He had organs built for his home in Baltimore and for his Newport, R.I., "villa," where he and his family and friends fished for striped bass.



*Roosevelt's Centennial Organ at the 1876 Philadelphia Exposition.*

Winans had some of the finest builders in the country making his instruments. August Pomplitz built a \$40,000 organ for the Winans home in Baltimore. In Rhode Island, Winans collaborated with Hilborne Roosevelt to build an open-air organ powered by a steam engine. Roosevelt, a cousin to both presidents, held the first American patent for an electric pipe organ. His electric organ provided much of the music at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876, where a Winans & Whistler reel also was exhibited.

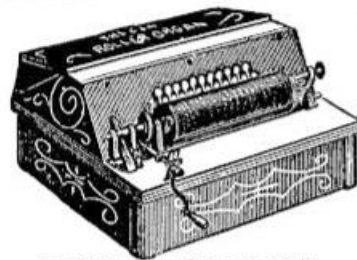
Playing music with the instruments mentioned above requires the performer to have some modicum of musical training. Since ancient times, when the wind harp was known at least in Greece, India, and China, mechanics have striven to design instruments that can be played with virtually no training. During the nineteenth century, these mechanical wonders often

depended on one of two major methods of producing tones. The first was the use of paper scrolls whose perforations determined which reeds, plucks, or hammers were activated by air flow. Such instruments required the means to blow the air and to unroll the scroll across the stream of air. Eventually, scrolls were replaced in some machines by rotating, perforated, metal discs. The second method employed a rotating cylinder, or cob, affixed with arrays of short pins that caused tuned metal strips to vibrate and produce sound. This is how most small music boxes work. Some means must be provided to turn the cob. The invention of the Edison Phonograph finally made it possible to listen to music played with no more effort than winding a spring motor.

In 1887, Samuel R. Tisdell was one of three patentees who co-invented a hand-cranked music box. The patent was assigned to the Autophone Company, Ithaca, N.Y., which manufactured the instrument and marketed it—with huge success—as the Gem Roller Organ. Its hand crank turned a cob.

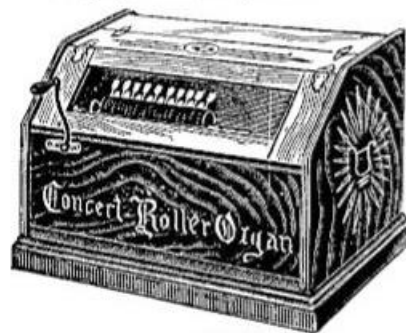
### Roller Organ.

The Roller Organs are new and very popular mechanical musical instruments, and our prices are so low that our sales are very large. The music is produced from reeds (regular organ size), 20 in number, which are perfectly tuned and covered with steel valves. The latter are operated by the music roller which is supplied with pins similar to those on an ordinary music box. The roller is made to revolve with gearing, which also drives the bellows. All the working parts are made of solid metal, easily accessible, and on the whole are well made and durable. They have a tone of good volume. Any child can play them, and we can furnish all styles of music.



Weight, boxed, 15 pounds.

26400 THE GEM Roller Organ, as described above, imitation black walnut case, length, 18 inches, width, 14 inches, height, 9 inches. Price, complete, including three rollers...\$4.50



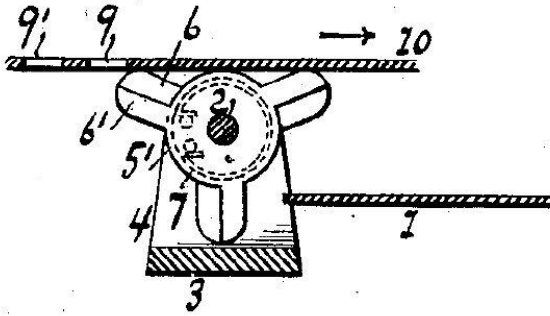
26401

26401 THE CONCERT Roller Organ, larger in size, hence greater volume of tone, handsome black walnut case, glass top, finely finished. Length, 19 inches, width, 16 inches, height, 14 inches. Price, complete, including five rollers....\$9.00 Weight, boxed,

30 pounds. We can furnish extra rollers for above at 23c. each; per dozen, \$2.50. Extra by mail, each 7cts. Each roller plays one tune. Music list furnished on application.

*Gem Roller Organs, as shown in an 1895 Montgomery Ward catalog*

About a decade earlier, Tisdel had partnered with Alonzo Fowler to advertise and sell Fowler's rods and, of course, his hard-rubber "Gem" reels. At the time Fowler & Tisdel existed, Tisdel also ran his own business, selling a variety of products that included sporting goods. Although he did not invent any reels, he was certainly instrumental in popularizing Fowler's, and he may well have played a part in its manufacture.



*Berner's wheel is turned by air flowing through perforations (9, 9') in the paper scroll (10) and causes the metal reed (1) to vibrate.*

Hoping to produce smoother action in certain musical instruments, Paul P.T. Berner patented an improved "spur wheel" in 1896. The wheels, with their rounded teeth, "played" the metal strips, causing them to vibrate and produce tones. Each wheel would be turned by a breath of fresh air coming through a perforation in a scroll or disc. Berner, still a German citizen, applied for his patent from Guttenburg, N.J., a town facing Manhattan that today has the distinction of being the most densely populated city in the U.S.

No doubt seeking a more pastoral venue, Berner moved to New York City, where he invented a bulky side-mounted reel with a planetary gear train that helped apply drag.

Berner's greatest claim to fame was his 1906 design patent for a flared phonograph horn. Three years later, he would earn a patent for the construction of a horn, which he assigned to the Searchlight Horn Company, N.Y. The company built and sold Berner's horn as the "Searchlight Horn," which was advertised as "The

The Talking Machine World, March 25, 1907

The MARVELOUS REPRODUCTIVE POWER  
OF THE

# Searchlight Horn

IS PRODUCED BY THE PARALLEL SHAPE WHICH  
REFLECTS THE SOUND IN PARALLEL DIRECTION

THE SEARCHLIGHT HORN IS THE ONLY  
HORN CONSTRUCTED ON SCIENTIFIC PRINCIPLES AS  
SHOWN IN ABOVE DIAGRAM.

REPRODUCES THE FULL STRENGTH OF THE RECORD  
Sold only through Jobbers Send to your Jobber for Samples

MANUFACTURED BY THE  
SEARCHLIGHT HORN COMPANY  
753-755 Lexington Avenue Borough of Brooklyn, New York

DISTRIBUTED BY  
**Every Recognized Edison and Victor  
Jobber in the United States**

*A 1907 ad for the horn patented by Berner.*

Crowning Achievement of American Ingenuity," thereby depreciating a few inventions like the telegraph, the airplane, the spinning reel, and the ice cream cone.

I hope these paragraphs convince you that there may be a relationship between what we consider as instrumental music and the vaguely defined "music of the reel." What we need now is our own Guido d'Arezzo who can help us tackle the understanding of reel music and more fully appreciate this art form.