



Music in Code

Street Piano

RICHARD:

Paul I'd call this a barrel organ but I wouldn't be correct would I?

PAUL:

No, you wouldn't. Its correct term is barrel piano or street piano. In fact they were in common usage on the streets of our towns and cities around the nineteen hundred period.

RICHARD:

And this I believe was used locally here in Warwick wasn't it?

PAUL:

Yes, I believe it was once the property of Fred Vittal. Not only was he mayor of Warwick at one time but he also ran an undertaking business and I'm told he would actually take to the streets with this instrument in the summer months when business was a little slack and he would generate a little extra income by playing the tunes and possibly drumming up a little bit of business as well.

RICHARD:

And how did he play it?

PAUL:

Quite simply, by turning the handle. The handle operated (OOV) a shaft with a skew gear that drove directly onto the end of the barrel. As the barrel revolved the pins in the surface of the barrel would engage with the tails of the keys that are here in this key-frame. And quite simply the hammers were deflected back and released against the strings.

RICHARD (OOV):

So (IV) was it popular?

PAUL:

Yes, I believe they were, in fact it wasn't uncommon for the passers-by in the street to actually dance to the musical tunes always assuming of course they could actually recognise the tunes, because given that this was just simply a wooden framed piano it very quickly would go out of tune and erm, the music that it played, perhaps you wouldn't describe it as music really. In fact it wasn't uncommon I'm told for shopkeepers to actually come out and bribe the operator with a few coppers to clear off and bother someone else with the noise.

RICHARD:

Can you play more than one tune on this barrel piano?

PAUL:

Yes you can, there are indeed ten tunes pinned on the barrel and by throwing the lever at the end you could indeed select any one of those tunes in any order and in fact as (OOV) I can demonstrate here - first of all we are lifting the key frame clear of the barrel so that the pins do not collide with the tails in the hammers and then you can probably just notice the barrel shifting slightly and then the key-frame resets itself.

RICHARD (OOV):

Well perhaps we can hear the tune you (IV) just set it to?

CAPTION:
Street Piano
A. Tomasso and Sons,
London c.1900