



Bell Piano Newsletter[®]

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What is a Reed Organ?

Contrary to what the name implies a reed organ is not made out of reeds as in plants. Rather this style of organ is similar in design to a harmonica. As air goes over and through the metal hole it vibrates the metal thus making the sound as if blowing air over a reed pipe.

Different kinds of reed organs had been developed since 1789 when George Joseph Vogler built a 63 key and 39-note pedal device called the Orchestrion. He was German and it was built in Holland by a Swedish organ builder.

Early organs had design and playing problems and were not that successful. In 1810 Gabriel-Joseph Grenie of Paris built his *orgue expressif* organ. This became the base model upon which other organs were designed.

In 1841 Louis-Pierre-Alexandre Martin of France developed the next stage in reed organs. His design had the reed struck by a felt covered wooden hammer that produced a bell like sound.

An idea turned down by Martin by an employee later become a success in the United States in 1861. Mason & Hamlin took the idea of sucking the air, rather than blowing it, by the reeds and turning it into a commercial success. This became known as the American Organ.

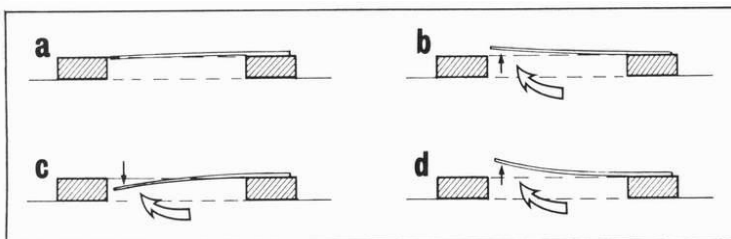
The reeds were housed in a sealed box called the music chamber. When pedals were pressed with feet, knees, or a hand one or more bellows moved the air through or past the reeds. When the key was depressed the air escaped over the open reed.

There were many sizes of reed organs and were given different names. The smallest was called a Bible organ because it folded up to be no bigger than a large table top bible. There were suitcase or trunk sizes that folded into a wooden box for easier transportation. Room or tent size ones were called melodeons and were popular tent meetings. Lastly there were the harmoniums that were up to 7 feet or 2.5m high.

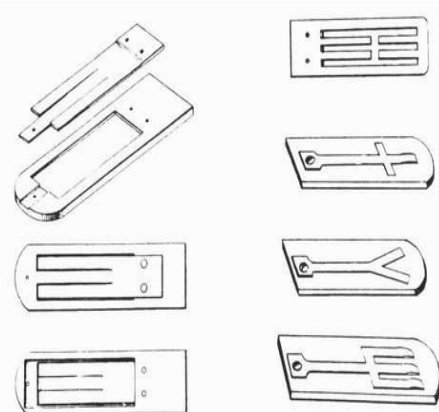
The large harmoniums had no extra playing parts above the keyboard. They were just more impressive although some housed piano keys allowing the player to have the best of both instruments.

Many organ companies of the day produced both styles of reed organs to suit their clients. But as pianos become more popular organs disappeared and by the early 1900s few were being made.

(Information is from Arthur W. J. G. Ord-Hume's book Harmonium—The History of the Reed Organ and its Makers, published by Vestal Press in Vestal NY in 1986)



How the organ reed works. Air forces the metal strip up in B and it's flexibility brings it down in C to be repeated in D then resting in A. The shape and size of a reed gives the sound. At right are different metal reeds from 1884.



To the right is a Bell 6.5 foot high organ referred to as a **harmonium**. These organs had no pipes only reeds and used foot power to generate air through a bellows producing the sound.

The space above the keyboard and behind the music desk is hollow. Some harmoniums had false pipes on top to give it the pipe organ look.

This particular harmonium has lamp stands on either side of the organ. There are pull stops like pipe organs allowing the organ to make different musical sounds such as horns.

The foot pedals have what Bell patented in 1887 as being mouse proof. Actually the patent design was for the way these pedals worked with a lever for better air flow and the by product of this was that the carpet on the pedals needed metal around the outside of the pedals, this prevented fraying and mice pulling on loose threads. Doherty patented a similar pedal enhancement later that year.

Below right is a smaller harmonium called a **melodeon**. This particular one is light weight and portable. It was used by Chalmers United Church for years at outside services.

The odd shaped “L” underneath the keyboard is called a knee swell. This allowed the player to bring more air into the music chamber giving a different tone and loudness. Some reed organs had two knee swells.

(These pictures are part of the Bell collection taken at the Guelph Civic Museum.)



This is an advertisement telling about the virtues of a Bell organ. The company name shown here is prior to the 1883 name change to Bell Organ and Piano and after the 1867 merger with Wood Piano. From the beginning the Bell Company was receiving awards for the sweet sounds their instruments produced.

(This is from the Wayne Kelly, collection on the Bell Company, author of Downright Upright)



Did you miss a previous issue?
 Do you want to know when your piano was made?
 Do you have questions about piano tuning and maintenance?
 By the end of December 2005 these and other questions can be found at www.MBI-communications.com
 There will be more than just piano information, so check it out. Tell us what you think so we can improve it.

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