

Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend



WITH THE KIDS

Anything but a grind

Organs of all shapes and sizes toot merrily away at Descanso Gardens for the fourth annual Band Organ Rally

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

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Kids watch Nickelodeon all the time. But how many could identify the instrument for which the television network is named?

Nickelodeons — along with other automatic musical devices, such as player pianos, band organs and circus calliopes — were the ultimate stereophonic system for generations past. In well-to-do households, these "one-man bands" were highly prized.

"They really were the entertainment centers of their time," says Frank Nix of Los Angeles, who owns more than 150 automatic instruments.

Nix brings out some of his prized organs at Southern California festivals and gatherings and says that, although adults find them fascinating, it's the kids who "can't get enough."

"I've seen parents having to literally drag their kids away" from the instruments, he says.

Families can fill up on old-time music this weekend when organs of all shapes and sizes will be tooting merrily away at Descanso Gardens for the fourth annual Band Organ Rally.

More than 25 instruments — from small hand-cranked monkey organs to large Dutch street organs — will be on display. The usually serene gardens will be filled with clangs, whistles, drumming and chimes, not to mention repeat performances of "Beer Barrel Polka" and countless Sousa marches and Strauss waltzes.

The Descanso rally is one of the few events at which Angelenos can hear this type of music. Organ rallies have been organized in Fullerton, Ventura and Santa Barbara, but the Descanso rally is one of the biggest on the West Coast.

The rally follows a 200-year European tradition of inviting organ owners to bring their instruments to the town center for a musical extravaganza. Popular in Germany, Holland and Belgium, these rallies draw auto-music groupies from the world over to hear and see the music.

Although the rallies are relatively new, the machines are not. Self-playing mechanical mechanisms have been around for two millennia — the Egyptian inventor Ctesibius built a water organ in the 2nd century B.C. and no doubt thrilled the ancients with its aqua-flavored melodies.

Through the years, music-making evolved into tower carillons (bells) and cylinder music boxes. The first pneumatic piano was invented in 1863. By the early 20th century, self-playing organs were highly sophisticated and could replicate the moves of their human counterparts.

Like most hobbyists, Jack Conway of Los Angeles fell in love with the music's sound and shape when he was a kid 70-plus years ago. He inherited his grandfather's two-cylinder player and "instantly became the star of show and tell."

"They shipped me around to other schools," says Conway, who has acquired 35 pipe organs, nickelodeons, player pianos, band organs and assorted musical contraptions. "Wurlitzer used to advertise that it made the 'happiest music on earth.' I think that is so true."

Conway will be hoisting two instruments to the rally: a 1925 Wurlitzer military band organ and a '20s calliope whose 43 brass whistles can be heard a quarter of a mile away. The calliope is trucked over in a Model A pickup.

"Half the fun of having them is sharing them," he says. "They were designed to be played outdoors for large crowds."

Part of the fun of the rally for enthusiast Robin Biggins is searching his house for his false mustache and stuffed monkey, dressing the part of the typical monkey organ grinder — without the troublesome monkey.

Biggins lets kids crank the handle on his 1920 Molinari monkey organ, afterward offering certificates of participation. "It's a very magical experience for kids," he says. "Many of them have never really heard a circus calliope or live merry-go-round music. It's nostalgic for us, sure, but for them it's something brand new."

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Organ Rally

Where: Descanso Gardens, 1418 Descanso Drive, La Cañada Flintridge

When: Saturday-Sunday, 9 a.m.-3:30 p.m.

Price: Free with garden admission; \$6 adults, \$1.50 children 5-12

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