

## Tea and the Pipe Organ



Bill Barger still lives in the house his parents bought in 1943, when he was only one year old. When *Barger & Nix Organs* moved from Mr. Barger's basement to their current location in McDonald, Tennessee, space was suddenly available to fulfill his dream of installing a home organ.

Originally purchased as a three-rank Wurliitzer home organ (c. 1928), Mr. Barger immediately added a fourth rank from a Marr & Colton theater organ. Ultimately, eight additional ranks were added.

The wind and relay systems are located in the basement below, which was the site of the original *Barger & Nix Organs* shop.

Pictured at the left is the pipe chamber that was once his childhood bedroom.

William Barger has been restoring, maintaining, and building pipe organs for well over half a century. With his partner, Charles Nix, and three full-time technicians, *Barger & Nix Organs* has a work schedule that goes well into 2018. In addition to scheduled work, they are permanently on call for the unanticipated emergency repair that invariably befalls the largest and most complex of all musical instruments. Mr. Barger credits their success to “concentrating on the very best suppliers in the industry and insisting on everything being absolutely as near perfect as humanly possible—all while remaining competitively priced.”

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The 60s may well have been the golden years of *High Fidelity*. It was during that decade that rapid technological advances in recording and playback produced vast improvements in sound reproduction for the audiophile (a term first used in the early 1950s). In the decades that followed, the music industry would take two steps forward, followed by an occasional step backward, in the attempt to bring concert hall sound to the home sound system.

The leading edge stereo components from Crown, Fisher, McIntosh, and Klipsch were out of range to most enthusiasts of the 1960s. Those who had limited income and some basic soldering skills had a budget-priced alternative, provided by the Electronic Instrument Company (EICO). Established in 1945, EICO provided quality kits, consisting of an assortment of tubes, sockets, switches, wire, capacitors, resistors and other components that, once assembled, provided state-of-the-art sound at a fraction of the cost of top-end assembled units.

The quest for concert hall sound from a home system continues to this day. But even the most advanced systems are unable to duplicate the experience of a live performance. Erick Lichte, writing in the July 2, 2012 issue of *Stereophile* magazine, explains it clearly:

It's always good to have a reference. No matter the endeavor, references help guide us and set standards for all we do. For many hours of every day, I'm lucky to enjoy the reference of live, unamplified music. Right now, I average over 20 hours a week of rehearsals and performances of various ensembles, and four to five hours of listening to recorded music on my hi-fi. Clearly, for me, my musical reference is not the sound of my audio system, but the sound of live music created in various venues and acoustics.

And the more time I spend making real music, the less I'm impressed with home audio reproduction. No audio system I've heard has been able to create the sound of 120 voices singing Beethoven's Symphony 9, or the physical sensation I feel through my entire body during a performance of Orff's *Carmina burana*, or the total envelopment I sense when I listen to—or

sing—renaissance motets in an acoustically lush space. To my ear, *all* recordings and *all* audio systems sound fake. Not only do audio systems impose on music colorations, grain, and an unnatural electromechanical feel, they also omit the dynamic nuances, spatial cues, and sense of scale that make music come alive. Fortunately or unfortunately, my reference standard of musical reality is too high, too strong, too *real* to allow me to be fooled into thinking a recording is actually live music.

While many would agree that the enjoyment of a live performance cannot be duplicated in a home environment, there are undeniable advantages to the home experience that cannot be discounted. Besides the freedom to enjoy music at any time of day, a home sound system accommodates personal preferences that are impractical with most public performances. For the writer, that personal preference includes the combined tea and music experience.

Good music, accompanied by a great cup of tea, has been a passion of mine for roughly half a century. My interest in music spawned in the 1960s, about the same time that I became interested in tea. Both of these pursuits generated a life-long fascination, if not an obsession, with the respective topic. Over time, I began to associate good music with good tea, and that association remains today.

The classic Ukers books, *The Romance of Tea*, as well as his two-volume tome from 1934, *All About Tea*, were readily available at the public library in the 1960s. These classic works generated a curiosity that would evolve to a quest for new tea experiences. Shortly thereafter, I came across a London tea company by the name of *Mark Austin Imports*, a company that had a brisk business shipping tea to U.S. soldiers who developed a taste for British tea while stationed in the U.K. during WWII. The personal level of service provided by *Mark Austin Imports* was the inspiration for *Upton Tea Imports*.

My first hi-fi system consisted of an EICO amplifier kit, a pair of Allied Electronics speakers that required finishing, and a Benjamin Miracord turntable. When assem-

bly of the amplifier was completed and connected to the turntable and speakers, I discovered that the clear, pure sound of my new stereo system was coming through only one channel! Perhaps I lacked the required “great deal of patience” or the suggested attention to detail that would assure successful assembly.

The solution to the problem, however, turned out to be both simple and educational. I purchased an EICO VTVM (Vacuum Tube Volt Meter) kit and, after *patiently* assembling the kit, went to work on troubleshooting the amplifier. It was a *eureka moment* when I discovered a capacitor that had been carelessly mounted with a lead shorted to the chassis. The fix was simple enough, and soon Mozart’s Haffner Symphony cheerfully came alive through both channels of my new music system.

It was not long before I discovered how much pleasure one could derive from really *listening* to music, with undivided attention, rather than simply listening to background noise. Early on, I discovered that level of listening was accentuated when paired with a proper pot of tea.

My education in music and tea ran parallel for several decades, and in due course, tea became both a vocation as well as an avocation. Music would never become a profession for me, since my talent in this arena is limited to listening rather than performing.

On occasion, I still bring out some of my favorite vinyl LPs and enjoy listening with a good cup of tea. Recently I did just that with a 1962 recording of the Saint-Saëns Organ Symphony with Eugene Ormandy conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra and E. Power Biggs at the organ. This ancient recording is perhaps my favorite version, although I happen to have five others on vinyl, and two or three on CD format.

Other than the Saint-Saëns Organ Symphony, I have very little organ music in my library and my knowledge of “the King of Instruments, the Instrument of Kings” is lim-

ited. However, my curiosity was stoked when the following letter landed in my inbox:

Dear Mr. Eck and associates,

I just received the Vol. 25 No. 4 Quarterly. I am so glad to hear about the forthcoming **made in the USA** teapots. We here at Barger & Nix Organs -- Mr. Nix also has an account with you and we both are avid tea drinkers -- also face the same sort of problems. Pipe organs are complicated, custom-designed, hand-built, expensive, wonderful musical instruments. W.A. Mozart called the organ the “King of Instruments.” It can be difficult when you are selling the best and most expensive product. But, most fortunately, there are always those who want something good, not something cheap. Indeed, cheap is never inexpensive, it’s just cheap. We have a good friend who, before he retired, owned a custom bicycle shop. He had a sign over the door which was in sight when you left his store: “The poorness of the quality is remembered long after the cheapness of the price has been forgotten.” A worthy saying, if I may say so.

Thank you for your fine business and most excellent service. May all of us who operate small business in the US continue to prosper and do better things.

Most cordially,

William Barger

There were several things about this e-mail note that “struck a chord” with me. First was the reference to the sign at the exit of the bicycle shop reading, “the poorness of the quality is remembered long after the cheapness of the price has been forgotten.” That phrase has quite a history. Ben Franklin may be the originator, since he is credited with stating, “the bitterness of poor quality remains long after the sweetness of low price is forgotten.” Aldo Gucci, who made his father’s brand a worldwide symbol of quality and luxury, advertised with a few subtle variants of that phrase.

The second thing that came to mind as I thought about Mr. Barger’s letter was how little I really knew about the largest and most complicated of all musical instruments. One thing I did know is that it is especially difficult for any recording of concert hall pipe

organ music to come anywhere close to the original sound and visceral sensation.

I decided to contact Mr. Barger to learn more. At the very least I would learn a little more about Mr. Barger, and how he discovered *Upton Tea Imports*. Perhaps there would be a story that would be of interest to our readers. My first letter to Mr. Barger was promptly answered with the following:

Tom:

We would, indeed, be most interested in your doing an article about us. Our company is similar to yours in many ways -- we began because of a perceived need and we have been at it since the very early 1960s by doing the highest quality work with the best possible materials without being too worried about what it cost. Good things are always worth their fair price. Inexpensive is usually not anything but cheap, a fact which your present ongoing doings with teapots seems to prove yet once again.

There is some information about us on our web site ([www.bargerandnixorgans.com](http://www.bargerandnixorgans.com)). However, this information is dated, and it can be significantly improved. Nevertheless, it is a good introduction to who we are and what we do here.

Mr. Nix and I both hope to have the pleasure of working with you towards something about us in your newsletter. We both look forward to reading your informative articles with the arrival of every issue.

With all best regards,

Bill Barger

In subsequent correspondence, I learned that Mr. Barger was originally an aspiring pianist who ultimately was smitten by the pipe organ, which is large, complex, and frequently in need of repair. While organ repair normally "requires an apprenticeship of five years minimum," Barger's natural curiosity and innate technical abilities prompted him to "graduate from being interested in playing the organ to being the person who could repair it and even build it." The demand for competent organ repair was strong enough that Mr. Barger soon found it necessary to hire additional help. And when part-time employee, Charles Nix, decided to join Mr.

Barger as a business partner, *Barger & Nix Organs* was formally established.

Learning the story of how Mr. Barger happened upon *Upton Tea Imports* was quite uplifting. In the course of normal business, Mr. Barger happened to meet a fledgling organist with great potential, "who at age 13 was playing a particularly poor pipe organ." The minor repairs that the church could afford were insufficient to bring the instrument to the level that befitted Richard's "great talent and musical gifts, undeveloped though they were."

A few years later, Mr. Barger and some of Richard's other friends arranged for him to attend Saint Andrew's-Sewanee School in Sewanee, Tennessee. In the words of Mr. Barger:

There he went from being a poor student to being a top honor student. Simultaneously, he studied organ and piano with the music faculty at The University of the South in Sewanee. He went on to Hope College in Holland, Michigan, on a full scholarship, graduated with highest honors, and went on to the University of Michigan where he finished his doctorate in church music.

Besides providing the catalyst for the development of Richard's career as Organist and Musical Director, Mr. Barger also introduced young Richard to tea. Years later, Richard discovered the website of *Upton Tea Imports* and suggested that Mr. Barger give us a try. Mr. Barger concluded his letter with the following moving comment:

I've been buying from you ever since. Just goes to show that when you do good things for good people, you do get good rewards. Of course, I introduced Chuck to your fine company, and we don't plan to shop anywhere else.

I have had the good fortune to correspond further with Mr. Barger. I have learned a tremendous amount about pipe organs through this correspondence. I have, however, learned so much more about kindness and generosity. Thank you, Mr. Barger.