

Anthony Faas' Automaton Musical Band

Gavin Holman, 28 February 2024

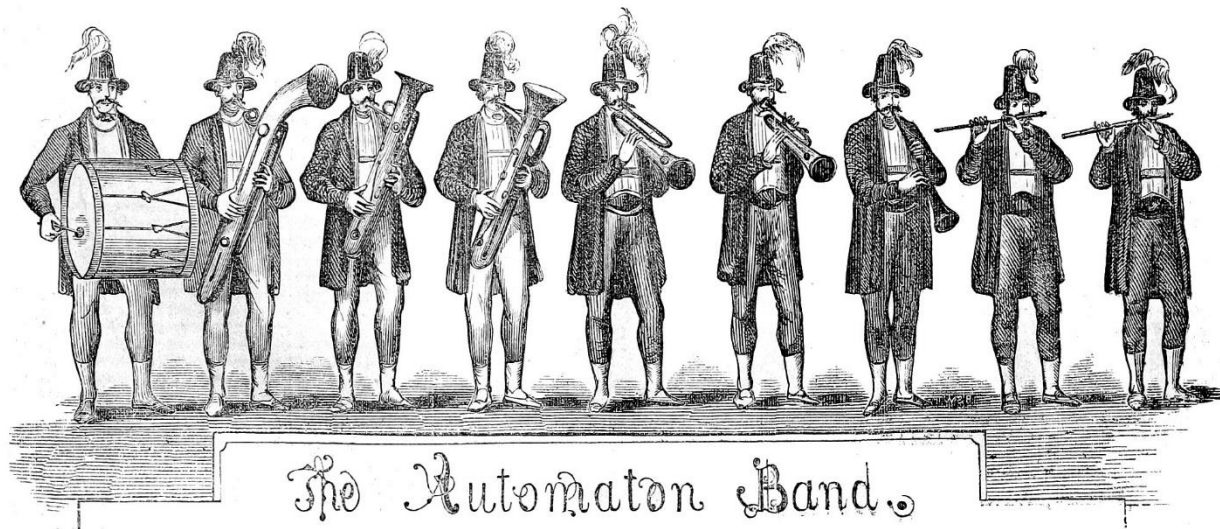
Anthony J. Faas was born in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, in 1818, and emigrated to the USA in 1840, settling in Philadelphia, where he married Christiana Schueller in 1841, and established his business making and selling accordions. He was an accomplished player himself, giving demonstrations and concerts. He was particularly noted for his 'American Accordeon', which he developed and manufactured from 1847, and for which he received two silver medals at the annual exhibitions of the Franklin Institute. His musical business also sold and repaired other instruments, including melodeons and seraphines.



Anthony J. Faas

During his first decade in the USA he developed and built an automaton band, at a reported cost of \$20,000, consisting of nine life-sized figures, dressed in Tyrolean style costumes, with a repertoire of 24 different pieces. The individual 'instrumentalists' were two flautists, one clarinetist, two trumpeters, three bass horn players, and a bass drummer.

The first concert of the band took place at the Musical Fund Hall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on Tuesday 20 May 1851. The 'band' performed the following pieces: "Grand March from Norma", "Elfin Waltz", "Charlotte Crist Polka", "Tyrolese Waltz", "Hail Columbia", "Jenny Lind Polka", "Gungl's March", and "Nightingale Waltz". Anthony Faas also played some pieces on the accordion.



Performing to great acclaim over the next few weeks, Anthony Faas moved his band to Barnum's Museum, on the corner of Seventh and Chestnut Streets, Philadelphia, where it was a major part of the show and exhibition mounted on 4 July 1851.

P.T. Barnum had opened his museum in Philadelphia on his return from Europe in 1849, staying long enough to identify himself with the museum and get it off the ground, before leaving it in the hands of various managers. In 1851 he sold it to Mr Clapp Spooner, for \$40,000 – a fortunate sale for him considering the fire later that year.¹



P.T. Barnum in 1851

Faas' band remained on display and performing at Barnum's until Tuesday 30 December 1851, when fire ripped through the Museum, destroying the building and all its contents – curiosities, cases of birds and animals, costumes, dioramas, scenery, and much more, including the Automaton Band. Only some minor curiosities and the 'Automaton Card Player' were saved from the building. Some adjoining buildings were also damaged, with losses to their stock and contents. Reports estimated the loss to at \$200,000, with the building costing \$80,000 and it being insured for \$30,000.²



Barnum's Museum in Philadelphia, c. 1850

This disaster would have been a huge blow to Anthony Faas, who had only been enjoying the fruits of his labours on the Automaton Band for six months. However, he still had his accordion business and personal performances.

¹ Barnum, P.T. – *Life of P.T. Barnum*, The Courier Company, Buffalo, New York, 1888

² Louisville Daily Courier, 1 January 1852

Over the next year Faas must have rebuilt the Automaton Band, for he managed to get it operational once more, appearing at the Apollo Hall, in Baltimore, in February 1853. He then toured with it around various cities in the state.

On Monday 26 December 1853, he appeared at the Masonic Hall, Pittsburgh, with a couple of supporting acts, with the Automaton Band being the main attraction. Faas himself provided:

...some difficult airs on his Patent American Accordeon, and gave a celebrated imitation of a locomotive starting, stopping and at full speed, with a steam whistle, blowing off, etc. The whole forming a chaste musical, and unexceptionable entertainment.³

The last known appearance of the Automaton Band was at Morgantown, West Virginia on Friday 3 February 1854.

Faas's Automaton Band was exhibited in this city on Friday and Saturday evenings last. It is truly a 'musical wonder'. The figures, made of wood and dressed in a sort of military costume, and the size of life. They hold their brass instruments in hand and to their mouths all the time, and when the *screws are let loose*, as the machinery on which they stand is started, the instruments are blown by means of pipes and keys in the necks of the figures, and first-rate music is produced. The bass drummer puts in his part well, only missing the time a little occasionally. The affair is very ingenious and was invented and built by Mr Faas, who is a great musician. The automatons look very much like human musicians.⁴

A much fuller description of the band and the work that Anthony Faas undertook to create the automatons, was given in Gleason's Pictorial, which also furnished the image of the band shown above.

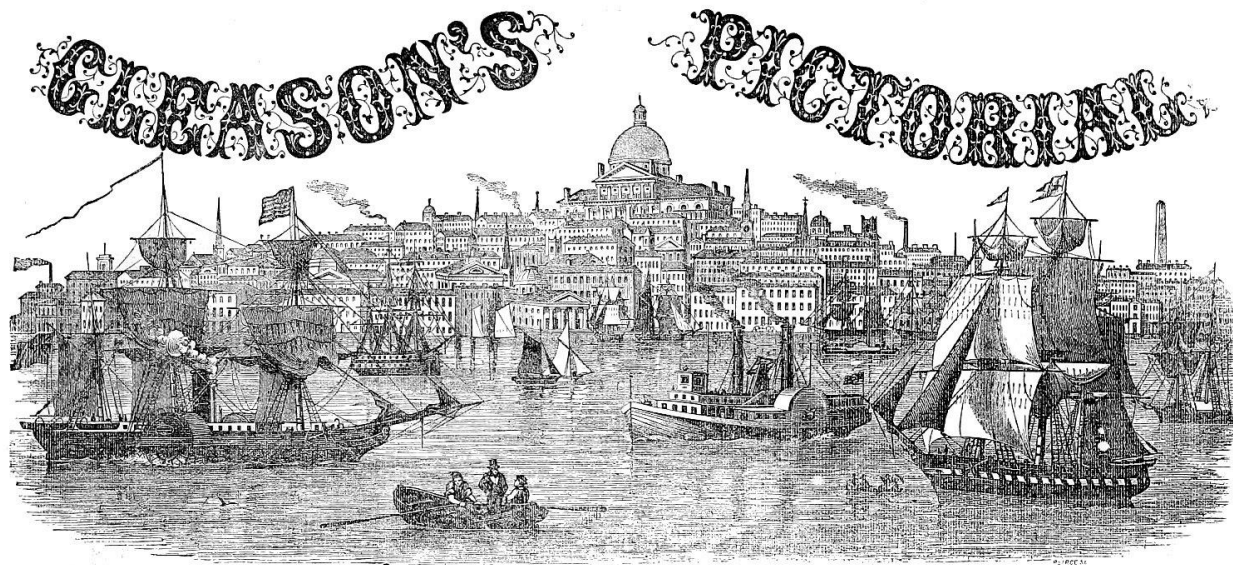
One of the most extraordinary musical inventions ever conceived by the human mind, is exhibiting to the public of Philadelphia, at the Musical Fund Hall. The idea was conceived by Mr. Anthony Faas, the maker of the celebrated American Accordeon, which attracted so much attention at the annual exhibitions of the Franklin Institute, and for which he received two silver medals. This musical invention consists of nine automata, as large as life. There are two flute players, one clarinet player, two trumpets, three bass horn players, and a bass drummer. The figures are dressed in the Tyrolesian costume, and present quite a natural and imposing appearance. By pulling a slender wire, the instruments are partly raised and the heads of the figures drop forward in the most natural manner. The machinery, of course, is complicated, and of immense power. The music is excellent, and one can scarcely realize that the figures are not human beings. The drummer, in beating time, does his part to perfection. Marches, polkas, waltzes, patriotic tunes, and opera pieces can be performed with remarkable precision and sweetness of tone. Mr. Faas assures us that he has bestowed ten years labor on this work, and, of course, under the greatest difficulties. Even the drummer, that would seem to be the easiest made, caused him three years of almost undivided attention. When Maelzel's

³ Pittsburgh Post Gazette, 24 December 1853

⁴ American Union (Morgantown WV), 11 February 1854

automaton chess player and automaton trumpeter were introduced to the citizens, they created an immense sensation. The encomiums then passed were fully deserved; but how much more interesting and ingenious is it to array nine, with a variety of instruments, and to make them play so well that some of the bands of musicians of our city might well blush. Mr. Faas never permitted anyone outside his own domestic household to know what he was doing. He was an object of suspicion by some of the police. They had seen accordeon valves lying about his house, at different times, and they conceived the idea, that these were unstamped German silver counterfeit quarters, and they watched close. The unsuspecting, ingenious gentleman, who was pursuing his invention under the greatest difficulties, couldn't ride in an omnibus but that an officer would also take a ride in the same vehicle. In conversation with him, attempts were made to find out what he did in a certain room in his house. He never divulged the secret, and this fact alone strengthened the officer's suspicions. All this time, Mr. Faas did not know what they were after. One day he proceeded to Red Bank, New Jersey, for pleasure; so did an officer. At another time, he went to Reading, Pa., on business, and, strange as it may seem, an officer, whose face was familiar to Mr. Faas, had business there too. As the men of law never could get any evidence that would warrant an arrest, Mr. Faas of course remained free. It was not until recently that the secret of the invention became known, and thus the doubts of all have been removed. Mr. Faas is a man of great skill, ingenuity and goodness of heart, and is highly esteemed by all who have the pleasure of an acquaintance with him. Altogether this exhibition may be looked upon as a most wonderful discovery. It is intended to visit, with this wonderful exhibition, the principal cities of this country, and eventually to make a tour of Europe. Wherever so novel and ingenious an invention shall present itself, crowds of curious people will be sure to throng to see what might very properly be called the wonder of modern times. We cannot consider this wonderful invention minutely without feelings of astonishment at the perfection to which mechanism has been brought in these times, what remarkable inventions are daily discovering themselves, and also thinking within one's self, when shall this ride of improvement stop, what new wonder is science secretly preparing for us, and by what new effort and success of genius are we next to be astonished! Mr. Faas richly deserves the success that is sure to crown his genius, and out of this new and almost miraculous production he will realize, doubtless, a splendid fortune. Maelzel's mechanical genius did not lack for appreciation, but behold, a mightier than Maelzel is here. Even at the time when the automaton chess player was being exhibited in most of our principal cities, if anyone had been bold enough to prognosticate the possibility of such a piece of machinery as a band of automaton musicians, able to play correctly and in perfection of time and tune, the most elaborate waltzes, rondeaus and airs, he would have been looked upon much as was Fulton, when he first declared that the ocean would one day be navigated by steam. If music and singing were as generally taught in this country as in Germany, there need be no doubt that American ingenuity would furnish many pleasing combinations of the harmonious and of the useful. The idea of giving "music for the million" by the aid of machinery is well worthy of all Yankee consideration. Chickering's pianos are said to "almost talk," and we should not be surprised if there are contracts made for any number of "machine bands" on some great procession day.⁵

⁵ Gleason's Pictorial, volume 1, number 7, 16 August 1851



F. GLEASON, { CORNER OF BROMFIELD
AND TREMONT STREETS.

BOSTON, SATURDAY, AUGUST 16, 1851.

\$2.00 PER ANNUUM. } Vol. I.—No. 7.
6 Cts. SINGLE COPY. }

After this time, Anthony Faas returned to his business of accordion making and repairing, branching out into repairing handles for baskets. He remained in Philadelphia, with his family, dying in 1894.