

Richard Karsy's Giant Myriophone

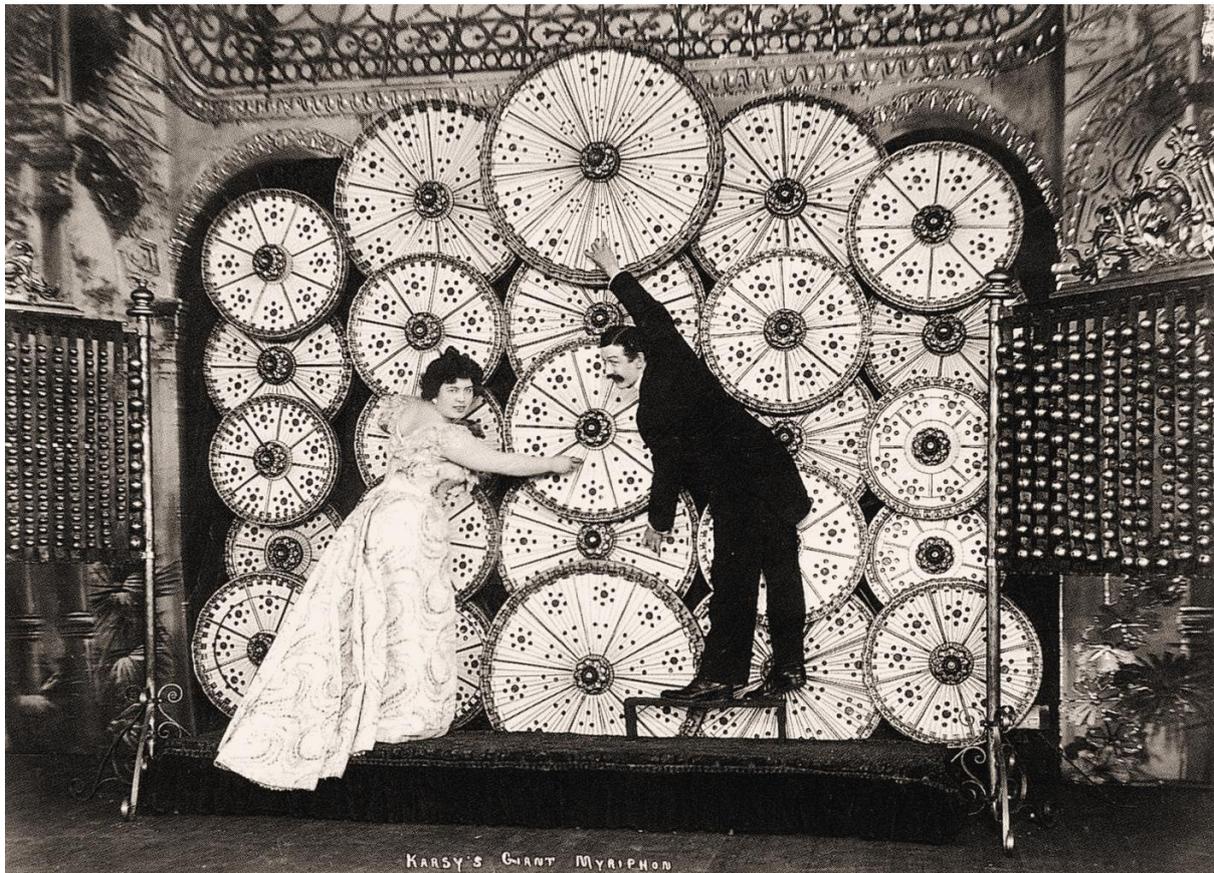
Gavin Holman, 27 February 2023

Richard M. Karsy was born in Hamburg, Germany on 25 April 1863. His father and mother were later recorded as Carl Price and Johannah Schmidt. He became a musician in Germany and, at some time in the early 1890's, he met and married his wife Josephine, who was born in 1871, in France.



During this time, he conceived the idea of the Myriophone, constructed it over a period of four years at a cost of \$3,000, equivalent. The first known appearance of the two Karsys with the Myriophone, is at the Reichshallen, in Düsseldorf, Germany, in January 1896.

It required both the artists, Richard and Josephine, to play the instrument, with the help of stage-hands, behind the scenes to operate to turn the discs. As you can see from the photographs, it was a large, unwieldy, construction, and must have taken a significant amount of time to set up in a new venue, and also a large number of cases to transport. There were also two racks of sleigh bells which were also played by the couple in their act.



The Giant Myriophone, photographed in New York, c. 1906

The genesis of this unique musical instrument is given in the following account, originally published in the *Kansas City Star*:

"Music from 2,000 strings

A musician was in a cycle repairing shop one day watching a workman putting new spokes into a wheel. In order to determine whether they were tightened up enough, the workman plucked the wires with his fingers and a musical sound was the result. An idea struck the musician, and after four years of hard work he succeeded in constructing a musical instrument that has delighted thousands of people. The musician is M. Karsy, and the instrument is what is now known everywhere as the Giant Myriophone. The music of the myriophone is similar to that of a full string band, but it only takes two people to produce the immense volume of sound. It has the appearance of a large screen with a number of wheels fitted on the front. These wheels have strings fitted on them, and are very much like cycle wheels. The muscles of stage-hands give them a rotary motion and the performers, who have a small piece of wood in each hand, touch the strings, thus making a note, which can be prolonged to any length. Mr. Karsy explained the mechanism of the myriophone to a reporter for the *Star* this morning. "There are 25 discs" said Mr. Karsy, "Each disc has 80 strings, making 2000 strings in all. Piano strings are used, and on each disc there are two single notes and one double note. Beech wood is used in the construction of the instrument, and the sound boards in the discs are of the same material as the sound boards of pianos. Many kinds of substances have been tried for the frame of the myriophone. First I tried iron, but it was too heavy, aluminum proved too brittle. A composition of iron, copper and aluminum has proved very satisfactory."¹



The music they played included overtures and selection from operas such as *Faust*, and popular song hits. The instrument was lit with electric lights, and overall was said to be one of the most elaborate stage settings in vaudeville. Their "*Faust Fantasia*" often was the concluding number of their act.

"Is a Wonderful Device

Karsy's myriophone is one of the features that attracted much attention yesterday, The device occupies the southeast corner of the south vaudeville stage and stands about fifteen feet high. It consists of twenty-five revolving, circular sounding boards, as perfectly made as a guitar box, and from the center to the outside rim of each radiate fifty steel piano-wires, perfectly tuned, two tones to the disc. These discs revolve in opposite directions, propelled by an electric motor, and Prof. Karsy and his wife play upon the same with tortoise shell "pickers", such as are used by mandolin players. Owing to the size and depth of the discs, or sounding boards, and the fact that they are in motion, the sound carries to every corner of the carnival grounds, although it is infinitely softer and more pleasing than the sweetest mandolin or guitar. The Karsys render such music as the "*Rusticana*" together with many popular selections. They also do a very pleasing act with the sleigh bells."²

¹ *The Pittsburgh Press*, 25 November 1901

² *The Gazette* (Cedar Rapids), 3 October 1904



The instrument, apparently, was “noted for its beautiful tonal effects, for its great volume, and the large number of selections that can be played”.³

It was also reported that Karsy had “placed several others, which were playing in the principal theaters of the large cities in Europe”.⁴ However, there is no evidence of other myriophone machines or performances other than the Karsys, and it is more likely that this in fact referred to the Karsys’ previous appearances in Europe in earlier years.

With regard to Karsy’s giant Myriophone, Gloucestershire have never seen it before, and as they may never have another opportunity of doing so they should not miss the present one. We assure our musical readers that they will greatly enjoy the novel instrument. It consists of twenty-seven revolving perpendicular discs each fronted with radiating wires, numbering 2,000 in all. The two performers stand on a platform before this mammoth instrument and extract the music by pressing on the revolving wires with pieces of shell. The result is a representation of an immense mandoline band, and with the accompaniment of the orchestra the effect is extremely pleasing both to the ear and eye, for the scenery is tropical, and in the midst of the luxuriant vegetation the Myriophone appears like a giant butterfly. The spectacular effect does not end here, for after playing a classical overture in the limelight, the footlights are lowered, and topical ditties are played while a cinematograph film of a firework display and lantern slides of flower bouquets are reflected from the background of the instrument. We understand that the Myriophone was invented by the male performer.⁵

³ *The Daily Morning Journal and Courier* (New Haven, CT), 16 August 1905

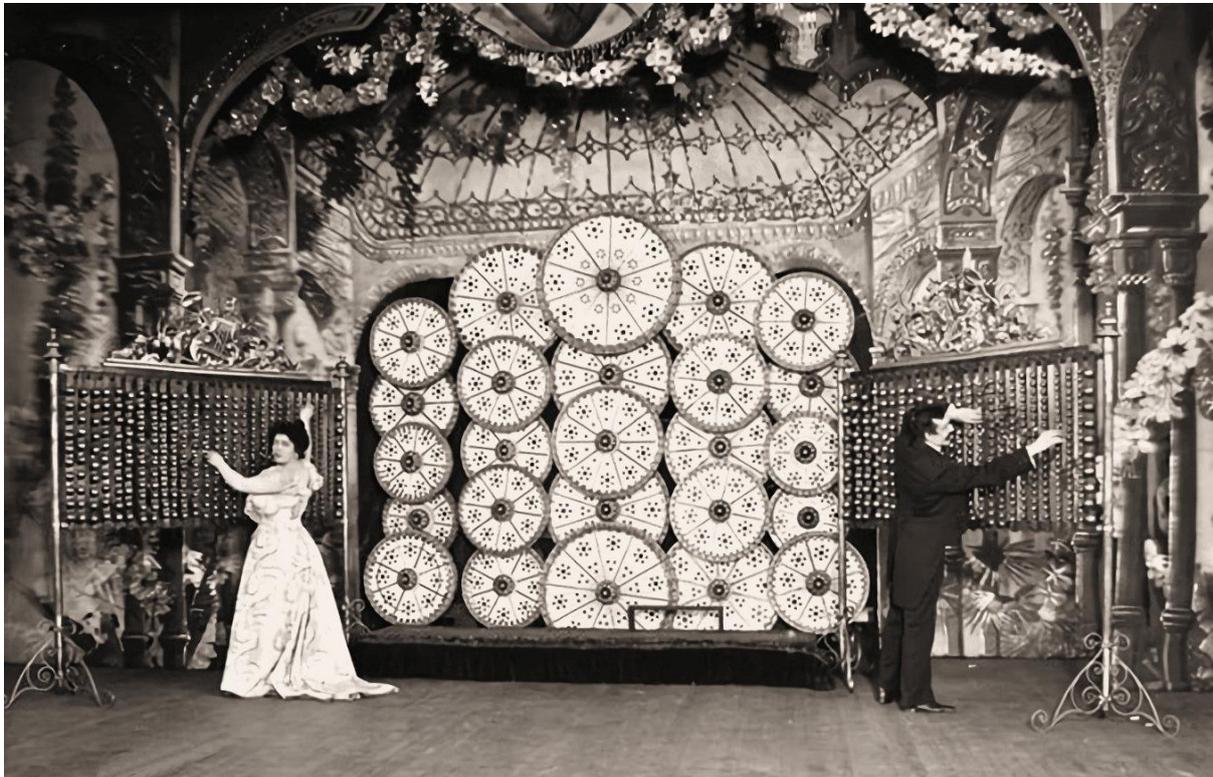
⁴ *The Daily Morning Journal and Courier* (New Haven, CT), 16 August 1905

⁵ *Gloucestershire Chronicle*, 11 December 1909

Another description of the machine and their act appeared in the Music Trade Review:

Unique Musical Instrument.

Mr. and Mrs. Karsy, an inventive and original “team” on the variety stage, have created a new and extraordinary musical instrument which is known as the Giant Myriophone (Myriphon). It is the work of a genius and when under full swing produces music similar to that of a full string band. Only two persons are required to produce this immense volume of sound. “The Myriophone has the appearance of a large screen, with a number of wheels fitted on the front. These wheels have strings fitted on them and look much like bicycle wheels. They are set in motion by four lusty stage hands concealed in the rear, and the performers who have a small stick of wood in each hand touch the strings, thus making a note, which can be prolonged to any length. The Myriophone consists of twenty-five discs, each with eighty strings, making 2,000 in all. The sounding boards are made of the same wood as is used in pianos. Regular piano strings are used.⁶



The full details of how the machine was constructed, or operated, are not known. Karsy’s patent has not been seen. Aside from the lighting effects, there were several reports of the machine having some electrical operations as well.⁷

Details of the appearances of Richard and Josephine Karsy, with their instrument, are given below (this list is not complete):

- **1896** – January-March - Reichshallen, Düsseldorf
- **1898** - September - Mellinitheater, Hannover

⁶ *Music Trade Review*, Volume 34 (23), 7 June 1902

⁷ *The San Francisco Examiner*, 25 November 1912

- **1899** – February - Empire Palace Theatre, Portsmouth; March - London Pavilion (sharing the bill with Dan Leno); April - Empire Theatre, Stratford; May - Lyric Theatre, Dublin; August - Empire Theatre, London



Interior view of the London Pavilion, prior to 1901

- **1900** – January - Grand Theatre, Hanley
- **1901** – February - Birmingham Hippodrome; then touring through Britain until August. At this time Richard and Josephine were lodging in 15 Lisle Street, Soho (now part of London's Chinatown), both having the occupation as 'Acrobat'. They embarked from Liverpool, arriving in New York. September - San Francisco, CA; October - Los Angeles, CA; November – Detroit, MI
- **1902** – February – Boston, MA; April – Louisville, KY; June – Chicago, IL; September – Detroit, MI
- **1903** – January – Pittsburgh, PA; February - New Haven, CT; April – New York. This was followed by an engagement with Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth, in whose programme it was noted "*that a perfect symphony of sweet melodious tones were made to vibrate thru the tents*".⁸
- **1904** – March – (Richard Karsy arrived back in New York on the SS Vigilancia, on 19 March, following a trip to Havana, Cuba, Josephine was not listed as accompanying him); September - Cedar Rapids, IA
- **1905** - March - New York; June (the Karsys arrived in New York, 4 June, on the SS Vigilancia, from Veracruz, Mexico); August - New Haven, CT; November - New Orleans, LA
- **1906** – January – New York; March – Wilmington, DE; June - New York, July – Boston, MA; July - Winnipeg Industrial Exhibition, Canada; August – Boston, MA

⁸ *The Billboard*, 27 June 1942

- **1907** – May – Pavilion Theatre, Newcastle, England; August – Coventry; September – Stafford; (now billed as “Richard Karsy’s Myriophone” but Josephine is still in the act); December - Darlington Hippodrome
- **1908** – January – Bristol, on tour with “Poole’s New and Colossal (1908) Myrioramas” which had the Karsys as star billing. the Poole family entertainment business, founded by George and Charles Poole in 1837, lasted for 100 years, with Dioramas, Panoramas, Myrioramas, and they controlled theatres, variety halls and cinemas;⁹ February – Exeter; March to May – touring Taunton & South West; November - Colwyn Bay; December - Swansea + Aberystwyth
- **1909** – March – Bridgend; December – Gloucester
- **1910** – February – Bristol; March - Huddersfield Hippodrome. At this time Richard and Josephine were lodging at 41 Lisle Street, Soho. They departed Southampton on the SS Kaiserin Augusta Victoria, arriving in New York on 4 April 1910, thence to Baltimore, MD; June - Parc Sohmer, Montreal + Buffalo, NY; August - Pittsburgh, PA; December - New Brunswick NJ



Parc Sohmer, Montreal

- **1911** – January Akron, OH + Baltimore, MD; July - Minneapolis, MN; August – The Dominion Exhibition, Regina, SK, Canada; November – Madison, WI
- **1912** – April - Philadelphia, PA; October - Calgary, Alberta, Canada; November - Tacoma, WA + San Francisco, CA; December - Los Angeles, CA
- **1913** – January - Detroit, MI; February - Pittsburgh, PA; April - St Louis, MO; May - Wichita, KS + Tulsa, OK; August - Chicago, IL; September - Munster, IN
- **1914** – January - Reading, PA
- **1919** – June - Olympic Park, Irvington, NJ
- **1922** – June – San Francisco, CA
- **1924** – October - California Raisin Festival, San Joaquin, CA

⁹ Bailey, Jill - When the Myriorama unfolded its canvas battles, *Weston Mercury*, 2 August 1968

This is the last known performance of the Karsys with their marvellous myriophone. They had changed the spelling of their name during their time in the USA, and in later years were known as 'Karsey'. The couple made their home in San Francisco in 1918, and in 1930 were recorded as living at Number 8, Capitol, San Francisco, where they remained until Richard's death on 4 May 1932, and Josephine's death on 21 Sep 1934.

KARSEY—In this city, May 4, 1932, Richard W. Karsey, dearly beloved husband of Josephine Karsey; a native of Germany. A member of Musicians' Union, Local No. 6, and Harmony Lodge No. 199, F. & A. M., of New York City.
 Friends are invited to attend the funeral services tomorrow (Friday), at 1 p. m., at the chapel of H. F. Suhr Co., 2919 Mission st., near 25th st., under the auspices of Seaport Lodge No 550, F. & A. M. Interment, Olivet Memorial Park.

KARSEY—In this city, Sept. 21, 1934, Josephine Karsey, beloved wife of the late Richard Karsey, and loving sister of Mrs. E. Wullschleger and Mrs. W. Wenzel; a native of France. A member of George Washington Chapter No. 409, O. E. S.
 Friends are invited to attend the funeral services Monday, Sept. 24, at 1 p. m., at the chapel of H. F. Suhr Co., 2919 Mission st., near 25th, under the auspices of George Washington Chapter No. 409, O. E. S. Interment, Olivet Memorial Park.

Further reading:

- Dahlinger, Fred Jr. - Ringing and Ringling: Showmen's Bells, Chimes and Related Novelty Instruments Part II, *Carousel Organ*, Issue 21, October 2004, pp. 10-270

			
2-BIG-2 SHOWS DAILY	TEMPLE AND WONDERLAND		BIG VAUDEVILLE BOOM
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BIG VAUDEVILLE BOOM	THE MAJOR SISTERS In a Novelty Act.	THE MUSICAL KARSYS and the Giant Myriophone.	COLE & JOHNSON The Peerless Entertainers.
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Detroit Free Press, 14 September 1902

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Commencing **MONDAY, MARCH 9th.**

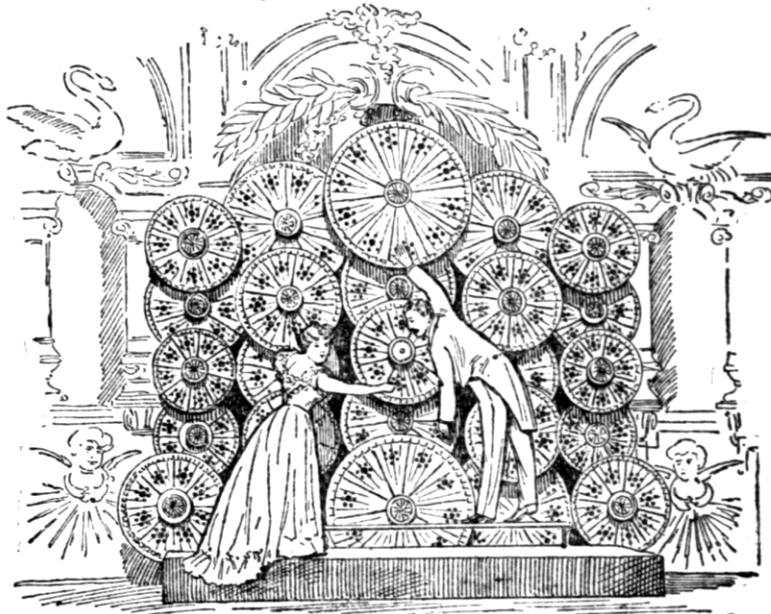
Each Evening at 8. Doors open at 7.30. Early Doors at 7—3d extra to all parts.
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This Instrument consists of 25 Discs, each consisting of 80 strings (making 2,000 in all), revolving at the same time, while each disc throws out a Grand Display of Fireworks, combined with a wonderful Electric background.

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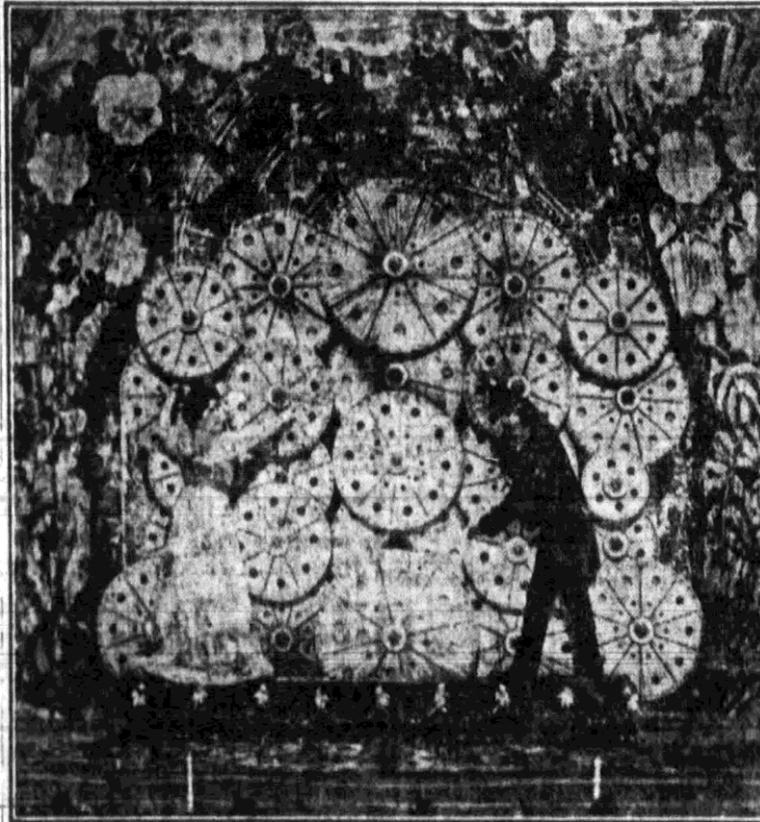
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Taunton Courier, 4 March 1908

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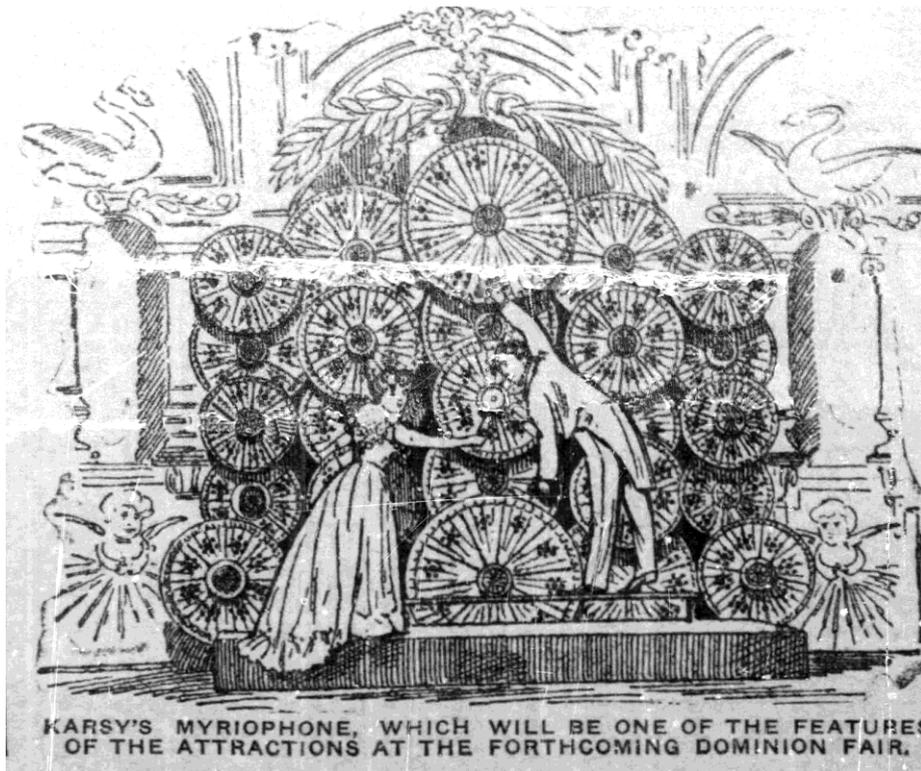


Karsey's Giant Myriophone
A GREAT MUSICAL NOVELTY

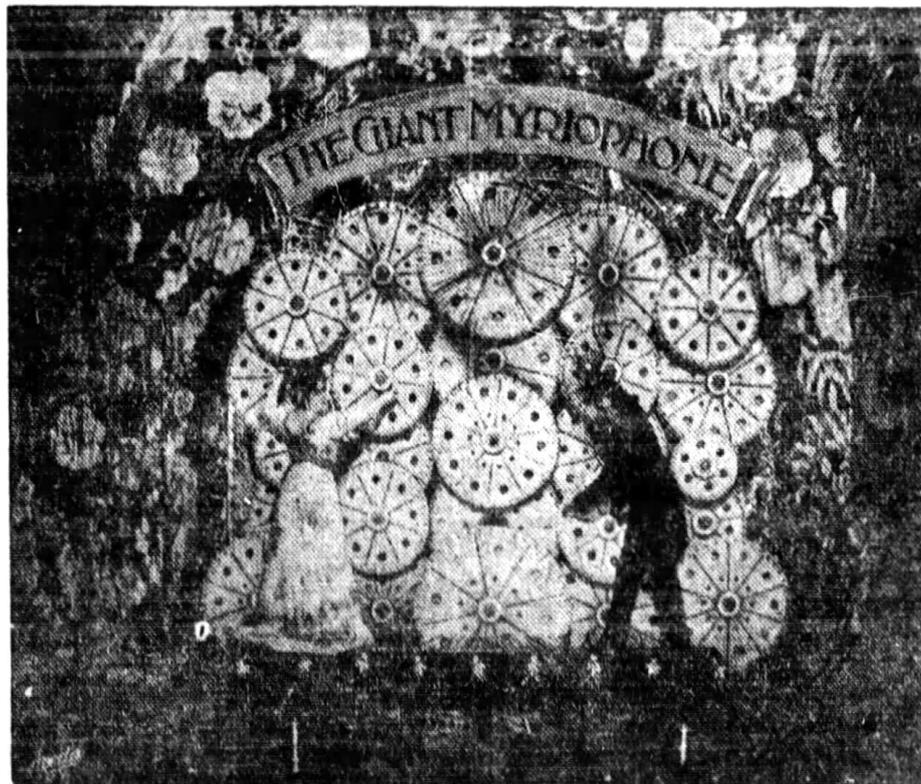
Which produces a melody never heard before, an instrument of 2000 strings.

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	Good for One 10c Admission to Twin City Wonderland	
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The Minneapolis Journal, 6 July 1911



The Leader Post, Regina, SK, Canada, 8 July 1911



KARSY'S GIANT MYRIOPHON, A MUSICAL SENSATION AT WONDERLAND PARK THIS WEEK.

Wichita Beacon, KS, 29 May 1913