

Dutch Street Organs (A Brief History)

Hans van Oost*

Contrary to popular belief the origins of what we now call the “Dutch street organ” are not lying in Holland¹ at all, not even in the Netherlands. In the early days, before about 1900, the concept of a Dutch street organ as it is known today did not yet exist. Street organs were, like in most other countries of Europe, small hand-cranked instruments that were



Figure 1. Hein de Bruin, the last street musician in Amsterdam using a pootorgel, around 1920.

supported by a strap around the neck and leaned against the belly (*buikorgel*), or were supported by a post (*pootorgel*, **Figure 1**). Some of the larger organs were mounted on a small three-wheeled cart. All of these organs were played, like in the old days, by means of pinned cylinders or barrels. Most of the early street organs in the Netherlands were of German origin and were built by firms like Wellershaus, Wrede, Bacigalupo, Bruder or Ruth.

The Forebearers

In the last decades of the nineteenth century several organ-renting firms were established in many big cities in Europe. Leon Warnies is known for having established the first organ-renting company in Amsterdam as early as 1875. Within a few years his example was followed by other firms such as Goudswaard in Rotterdam and Denies in The Hague (**Figure 2**).

The organ-renting firms started importing new book-operated organs from France as early as 1904. The first imported book organs were built in Paris by the

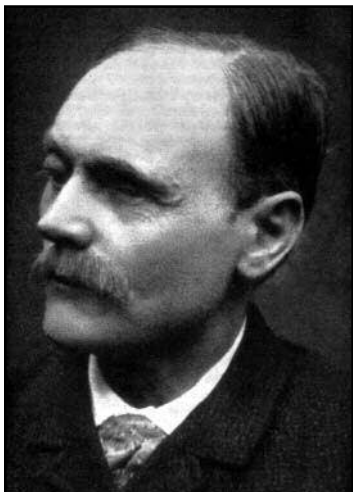


Figure 2. Leon Warnies established the first organ-renting company in Amsterdam.

firms of Gasparini and Gavioli; later, after 1910, many “orchestrophone” style organs were bought from Limonaire & fils (**Figure 3**). These Limonaire organs, with 48 to 56 keys and with eight bass keys, 10 accompaniment keys and 22 melody keys, were very well built and with their various solo registers they were very popular as street organs in the 1910s. [*The progression of conversion of Engelenkast can be followed in Figure 4 (1932) and a current photo (back cover) of “De Engelenkast” in the collection of Henk Veenigen, De Wijk, Holland, photo: Ed*]



Figure 3. The Limonaire 56-key orchestrophone organ, Engelenkast (Angels chest), just new from Paris, in use as a street organ in Amsterdam, 1912.

After the outbreak of WWI in 1913 it was impossible to buy organs in France. After the war in 1918 the French organ industry was in a steep decline, while in the meantime in Belgium new organ building firms had risen. From the early 1920s new organs were imported from Belgian firms like DeVreese, Bursens, Steenput, DeCap and others.

All these organs from France and Belgium were built for use on the fairground or in dance halls. In their countries of origin they were never used for street music. Many of them were, in fact, rented out or leased by the above mentioned Dutch renting companies for fairground use. It was easy for traveling showmen to rent a fair organ for the duration of their stay in a big city. Meanwhile, they had the opportunity to have their own organ repaired or repinned. The many remaining organs were rented out to local street musicians. Maintenance, repairs and provisioning of the latest new music were part of the renting conditions.

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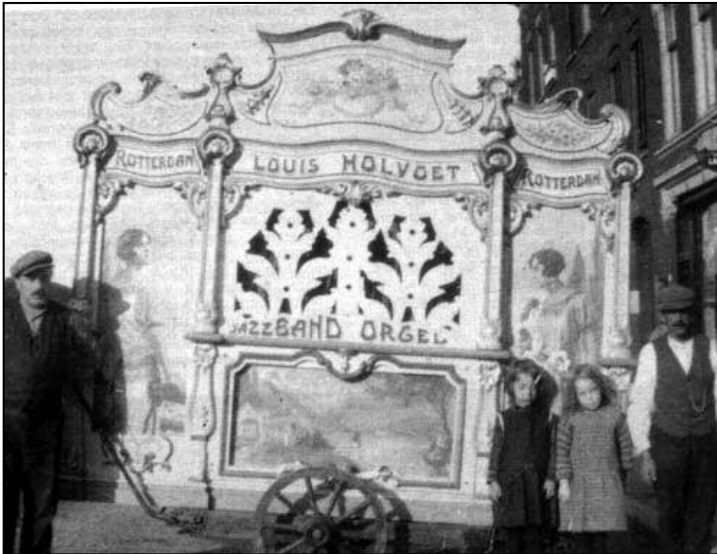


Figure 4. The same organ, after conversion, with only bourdon and violins inside, about 1935.

Need for changes

The original organs, although much loved by both the public and the street musicians, soon proved to have some nasty disadvantages when they were transported and played on the streets. Filled with reed pipe ranks such as vox humanas, saxophones and clarinets, they went out of tune very easily during their daily voyage over the cobbled streets of Amsterdam and other big cities. Moreover, due to the increasing traffic noise by motorcars, their sound also grew relatively too weak to be overheard properly. As a result, nearly all of these organs were rebuilt in the 1920s and 1930s to match the changing circumstances.

Carl Frei: Father of the Dutch street organ

In the early 1920s the German organ builder, composer and music arranger Carl Frei started an organ repair business in the town of Breda, in the south of the Netherlands. He did most of the rebuilding of the old French and Belgian organs, giving them the sound that is now so typical of a Dutch street organ.

In seeking a replacement for the vulnerable clarinets and vox humanas of the Limonaire organs he invented a new register, consisting of two rows of stopped pipes with very bright

voicing, one row tuned slightly sharp to the other one. He called this register "*bourdon céleste*." He made these changes merely by removing the clarinet and vox humana reed pipes, revoicing the two remaining ranks of stopped pipes, and tuning them to give a pleasant undulating effect. All other registers, like xylophones or even tuned sleigh bells, were removed. These registers demanded much organ wind and maintenance, and it was thought that they did not add much to the music.

He also replaced the existing 4' flageolet ranks by a third rank of violin pipes with the same undulating effect as in the stopped register. The rebuilt organs now had only two registers left: violin *céleste* and *bourdon céleste*. All new arrangements by Frei, who was a gifted music arranger (*noteur*), were made for this type of organ. This new sound soon became very popular among the growing crowd of organ fans, even to such an extent that street organs were banned temporarily in Rotterdam in the 1930s!

Carl Frei started building new organs according to this concept² although from the late 1920s there was no need to build new organs anymore, so most Carl Frei organs are complete rebuildings of older Dutch street organs to his own system.

For the larger 72- and 90-key organs, with counter melody sections, he devised registers which mirrored the melody section: the *unda maris* register, made of open pipes, and the *biphone II* register, made of stopped pipes, each register producing an undulating voice and playing via a tremulant mechanism. In the many rebuildings he sometimes kept existing flue pipe registers; all reeds again were

removed. The biggest of these organs, with 90 keys, were true "castles of the street." Many of these organs survive, still loved by many people in Holland and abroad.

Notes:

¹ Holland is, in fact, the original name for the western part of the country officially called the Netherlands.

²Only a few completely new-built organs by Carl Frei are known, such as the 67-key dance hall organ called *de Huyskens* (1925), the 90-key dance hall organ *het Zaalorgel*, now known as *de Lekkerkerker* (1926) and the 90-key street organ "de Negentiger" (1935) (Figure 5). Most other original Carl Frei organs were a product of extensive rebuilding of existing organs.



Figure 5. The Carl Frei organ *de Negentiger* (the 90-key) in its original state in Rotterdam, about 1935.

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Dutch Street Organs A Brief History (Part 2)*

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Further developments after WWII

In 1942 the German occupational forces in the Netherlands banned all street music, including the street organs. It was very difficult for them to establish what was going on about street organs and their groups of listeners. Besides, street musicians were regarded as “antisocial elements” by the Nazi party.

After WWII many organ renting companies were out of business. Many Dutch street organs, in urgent need of repairs after a long standstill, were offered for sale in a market that was asking for either more basic things such as food, or more modern things as Frigidaires. Prices for even reasonably good street organs sank to under scrap value. Carl Frei, who still had the German nationality, was forced to leave the Netherlands and made a new start in Waldkirch. His son Carl jr. built only one more new Dutch street organ in 1973¹.

The bad state of street organs after WWII, and the lack of public interest, were the main reasons why the KDV (Kring van Draaiorgelvrienden, Circle of Friends of the Mechanical Organ) was founded in May 1954. Another reason was the growing interest in Dutch street organs from abroad. Many old street organs were sold, or even given away (!), to people outside the Netherlands. The main objective of the KDV was to enhance the interest for the street organs within the Netherlands and increase the demand and thus the prices.

The new organization was an immediate success: within five years the KDV had over 1000 paying members. Several local clubs of organ enthusiasts raised foundations acquiring their own street organs, had them repaired, and played them in the streets in weekends and at festivals and even organ competitions.

In the late 1960s the demand for Dutch street organs had grown again to such an extent, and prices had gone up so much, that some organ repairers started to build completely new organs, or to rebuild the few still existing Belgian dance hall organs, mainly those made by Mortier (who never built a street organ before WWII). All these new and rebuilt organs were treated like their counterparts in the 30's: violins and bourdon céleste were added. Unlike Carl Frei, the later organ builders retained the saxophone registers when they diminished the dance hall organs. In a turn to romanticism the old organ statues, which were all removed in the 1930s' rebuildings, were put back on the street

organs. Statues were even added to organs that never possessed them before, like most Carl Frei organs!

Nowadays the Dutch organ rebuilders have a tendency to restore street organs to an earlier condition by restoring the original dispositions of the 20s and 30s of the last century.

Resuming, it is not easy to tell what is typical for a Dutch street organ. Three things seem to be typical:

- the bourdon céleste as a melody register
- the relative absence of reeds
- the many rebuildings and modernizations, both inside and outside.

Most street organs don't look or sound anymore like they were originally built; but that is again typical for the much-loved and appreciated Dutch street organ!



Figure 1. *De Arabier*—the most famous street organ in the Netherlands. It was built by P. Verbeeck in Belgium in the 1920s. It was delivered without statues and without trombone pipes. In 1948 the organ was rebuilt by Gijs Perlee in Amsterdam, who changed some registers and built in the classical bourdon céleste. From the 1950s more and more statues were added to the organ—first three, then five and then, seven! In the early 1960s it had no less than nine statues. By then the organ was slightly spoken of as *de Poppenkast* (the Punch and Judy show). Today the amount of statues have been reduced to five—five more than when the organ was shipped.

Names and nicknames.

In the years before 1940, no Dutch street organ bore an official or given name. The only names painted on the proscenium were those of the owner, and sometimes of the organ factory. In the early days a name plate depicting the type or model was also present, like “orchestrophone” or even “jazzbandophone” on Limonaire organs, “Ideal orchestre” on Marengi organs or “orchestre militaire” on Gavioli products. The only way for the

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Figure 2. *De blauwe Wimpel* (the Blue Ribbon) is a typical example of a reduced Mortier dance hall organ. Three Statues were added. This organ was converted in the 1970s.



Figure 3. This fine organ, *Drie Pruiken*, was rebuilt by G. Perlee of Amsterdam out of scrapped organs. It was the first organ after WW II to appear on the streets with statues. The instrument is still owned by the Perlee family.

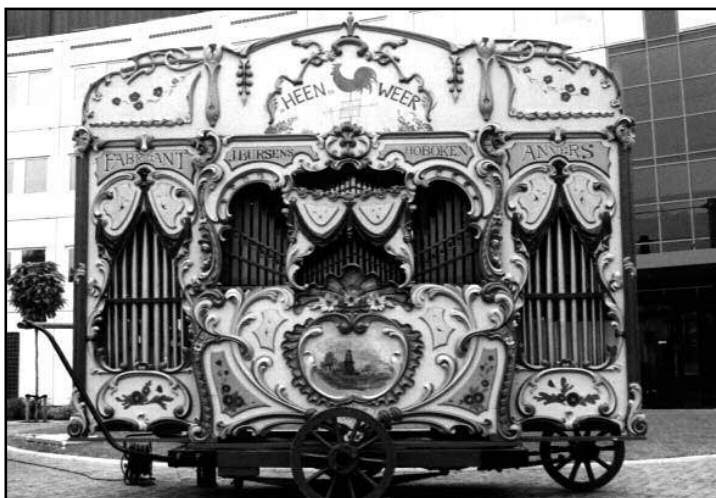


Figure 4. *Heen en weer*—an organ built by the Bursens company and was never equipped with statues.

public and organ grinders to tell them apart was to give them nicknames. The same organ, when rented in another city, could thus have more than one, and sometimes the name changed after rebuilding, especially when the front was changed.

These names could be derived of:

- the number of keys, like the seventy-key, the ninety key, the fifty-four Bursens
- front properties like the loop-holes, by the two identical round holes in front of the drums; the fire brigade, by the type of hat worn by the director statue or, a bit naughty, the “titties chest” because of the four wooden bare-breasted karyatids supporting the front
- overall colour like the big blue one, the blue Gavioli, the spinach-kettle (guess which colour?)
- other irregularities like “the cement-mixer” (*Cementmolen*) which had a very large cranking wheel with straight spokes, obviously coming from such as building equipment!



Figure 5. *Pijpenburger* is a good example of a newly -built organ. This wonderful machine was built by Mr. Vergeer of Gouda, who finished it in 1985. It is a breeding between the famous *Lekkerkerker* and other 90-key Carl Frei organs.

After WW II more and more street organs were given more or less official names. Most old organs received their former nickname as a given one. Now the organ names were painted onto the front, often in the place of the builder’s name. Organs (re)built after WW II were given names by their builders, and sometimes by their new owners. It must be said that these names were often changed again when the organ changed owners. These given names were, like one would expect, less archaic than the older nicknames. Names of planets, stars, cities and even complete fantasy names occurred lately.

Footnotes

1. The 90 keyless organ *de Korsikaan* named after its owner, Mr. Henk Kors of Nymegen, is still playing in Nymegen and surroundings.

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