

Large Organs

Arthur Prinsen

First, a bit of myself: as a young boy I was only nine when I started learning music. When I was 16 I did my first steps on the stage and went on to play with several bands that we had in Belgium. Nearly every dance hall we played in had a mechanical organ. Most didn't play but if they were still



Figure 1. Arthur Prinsen delivering this presentation in 1984 in Houston, Texas.

in use they would play the organ before or after the show. I was always looking at the cardboard system and saying "Oh boy, what is this?—How can it work?" None of us knew the answer. This saga continued on and every time I saw an organ I was impressed but no one could tell us anything about the organs.

One day we had a new member in the band and as usual, another organ surfaced with our playing and the same questions surfaced. He remarked "My father makes these cardboards." I said that I would like to see that so arrangements were made and we went to see the old man, who was Mr. Urbain Van Wichelen. I paid him a visit and talked with him and, while I was looking at his workshop, something happened—I thought: "That should be something for me." I asked him: "Is it possible that you can teach me?" I was told that because I was a musician I could not learn.

But, I returned and I started working for him—after awhile he noticed that I was interested. I worked regularly and after



Figure 2. Arthur Bursens while still active in organ work. He died in the early 1980s (he was 92 years old and worked every day till he was 90).. It was interesting that while everyone else was watching television he would work in the kitchen making small parts for organs, etc.

three months I was all alone on my own (he had had a severe illness) and I kept his business going while he recovered. When he recovered he wanted to retire and he offered the business to me. My wife, Paula, was a shop keeper and she sold everything; and I sold everything I owned to buy the business. Then, all the problems started.

We lived in an annex building with the workshop connected. I was still playing in the band and my wife was alone at nights. Once she heard something in the workshop while I was gone. Burglars were coming in and stealing tools and addresses of customers. This forced a move to Ploegsebaan 15, Brasschaat, Belgium where I set up shop.

There is no teaching in this business - you have to learn on your own. My former boss reminded me "It is not easy—you have to learn yourself—you will learn."



Figure 3. This is Mr. Decap photographed when working for me (he was 77 years old at time of photo).

Following the above burglary I set up business by myself—my wife was scared of the previous arrangement and this was better for my family. First we did all the arrangements of the music and nothing else, but later on, we became interested in repairing and selling our first organ.

Fortunately Paula's uncle was Mr. Arthur Bursens (**Figure 2**). Mr. Bursens used the rolls we made for the Arburo and I had contact with him about my interest. I told him I wanted to do my own restoration work and he told me that I didn't have time to do that because I was doing all the arrangements also. "If you want to learn, you have to come to me" but I didn't have the time for that because of my arranging all day long.

I asked Mr. Decap, who was not in the business any more, for help (**Figure 3**). He had been sent home from his organ business because he didn't like the electronic organs (he was forced to retire). He helped me with the restoration of my first organ. He stayed with me for three years—he came in like a

normal workman every day—he was a good teacher for me. It was very difficult for him to teach me—he knew everything but it was hard to pass this information down to me and, it was difficult for me as well.



Figure 4. This is a 78-key Fasano organ. This has a large facade but it is not a large organ. Fasano was a Belgium organ builder who immigrated from Italy. He only built 15 to 20 organs—this particular organ was built in 1913. It is currently in Jef Ghysel's collection in Brussels. The facade was restored by student artists at a local school.

I want to discuss with you about “large organs.” What is a large organ? In our country (Belgium), as you well know, we have these dance halls and portable dance stages (Figure 11). The big organs are used for dancing. Some café or dance halls didn't have organs so they hired it for an annual carnival (or fair)—people come to the dance halls and dance from the early morning to the next morning sometimes for 3-4 days. Organs are brought in for this and then the organ is dismantled and goes to the next place for another dance.



Figure 5. A Hooghuyts dance organ built in 1923. The painting is original. The organ is beautiful but not a large organ. There are not a lot of pipes—Hooghuyts have a special type of pipe—the organ can make more volume with just three ranks of pipes than other organs with five or six ranks. The mixture was specially made up with a very crisp sound. The organ is now located in Geeraardsbergen, Belgium



Figure 6. A 112-key Gaudin (French) dance organ with more than 1200 pipes. This would be a “large organ.” It is currently in the Gil son collection.

If they have their own organ they could play anytime, day or night. Some people look at a large or big front they think “Ah, a big organ.” Sometimes you have to be careful as there are some organ fronts that are very large and with a small amount of music provided by the actual organ behind. Not when they were original however—then, all the instruments and registers were present. As the 1930s approached everybody wanted to have an accordion—where?—right in front where people can see the movement. So, they had to take out some of the pipework (in Mortier organ it is where the baxophone rank is) and put in the accordion. The accordion doesn't really fit in (the tuning is a problem). It is hard to tune the accordion with the old pipes. They figure they don't need the baxophone pipes because they were heavy and harder to move. They justified that one couldn't hear the pipes anyway because of all the people present. They also removed the flute harmony, some of



Figure 7. This is a 87-key Gavioli which looks like a large organ but isn't. It plays without any registers. It uses the standard Gavioli scale—some 89-key Gaviolis have registers but it is hard to tell the difference because they only bring in one or two ranks of pipes. It does make a nice tone, however, and very beautiful to look at. Currently this organ is for sale by a Swiss dealer.



Figure 8. This is a large dance organ—the *Frangema*. It is a 121-key Decap and uses the largest scale made by Decap. There were only 16 made of this size. Decap later put in their organs electronics and speakers as they wanted a more modern sound. It is, however, hard to arrange music on cardboard because of limitations of the punching equipment. The organ remains in the Ghysels collection.

The organ has the name *Frangema* because the organ owners were forced to name their organs so that the renting public would know which organ to ask for when they wanted an organ.

the heavy counter melody; the extra side chest (with 16' bass pipes).

A large organ has many keys and instruments. Sometimes it will have more than 100 keys. Many times one can be fooled however as one example is an organ I know of that has 110 keys but plays music of only 84 keys. The extra keys have only one pipe for each key to widen the scale. This doesn't always mean that this is a large organ.

This presentation was given as a workshop in 1984 at the annual MBSI meeting in Houston, TX.



Figure 9. This is a 92-key Mortier organ now located in a museum in Japan. There is not really any difference between the 92-key and the 101-key (with the exception of extra percussion). The latter isn't more musical but owners can boast that "I have a bigger organ than you."



Figure 11 (above). A caravan of vehicles transporting not only the portable dance tent (hall) but also the organ (seen in Figure 12).

Figure 12 (below). A 121-key Decap organ with original accordions still in use in Belgium in the dance tent. An electronic section has been added without any addition to the music quality.



Figure 10. This was an 87-key Gavioli organ located in Tournus, France. The owner (Jean Ducloux) added extra trumpets and bass for increased volume. It doesn't exist now as one day a former worker put fire to the building the organ in which the organ was housed.

Born in 1933 Arthur Prinsen started his musical career playing the accordion at age nine. He went to Musical College and Technical School and played in a band at age 16. His recent history is included in this story. He now lives in Schoten, Belgium with his wife, Paula, and arranges new music and continues to build new organs.