# Music Arranging and the Computer*

**Tom Meijer**

Matthew Caulfield and others have invited me to discuss the impact the computer has had on an arranger's work. For the last five years I have made my new arrangements utilizing the computer. Looking back, I have come to the conclusion that this method not only has changed my job as an arranger, but that it has transformed the world of mechanical music as well

Previously I have been concerned about the costs of producing book music. I explained why prices for organ books always have been rather high, particularly due to the 19th century labor involved in the foot punching of the books. But I also showed that these costs not only concern the craft of cutting holes in cardboard, but even more, the arranging itself. It takes many hours to create an arrangement that fits the specific organ. In fact, each organ demands its own approach.

How to arrange for small organs with three bass notes and missing almost all sharps? Gerard Razenberg, a famous Dutch arranger for street organs, told me once that "arranging for such a limited instrument is like writing on a typewriter which misses certain characters for, let's say, 'b', 'j' 'k' and 't.'" You would never be able to use the words you wanted to use. Remember this comparison when you type your next letter or article for a hobby publication.

The author, second from left, socializing with three members of the Bumbling Bruder Tour (June, 1999)—Bob Conant, Fritz Gellerman and Howard Sanford—at the KDV rally in Arnhem, Netherlands.

The computer is a great help for the present-day arranger of music for mechanical instruments. I summarize some of the advantages below:

(1) With the computer the arranger can do the same things as he did before with paper and pencil, but quicker and easier-especially concerning the always occurring repetitions in the music. It is also easier to make tempo adjustments in a tune.

(2) At any moment he can listen to what he has arranged, while with the old method he only could hear in mind the final results of his work.

(3) One can easily transpose a finished arrangement from one scale to another. However, one must be careful with this: arranging for a German fair organ is far different from arranging for a modern dance organ.

(4) The arranger can print out the finished arrangement on a paper master, or cut the book with a computerized punching machine. Or, when the organ has MIDI capability, he can supply the customer with the arrangement on disk, ready to play the organ.

There is one risk with the rise of the computer in the field of fair organs and other mechanical instruments. It has been pointed out in the past that one of the attractive parts of mechanical organ enjoyment is to watch book music going through the keyframe. In 1971, when I tried to arrange my first organ book, I always stood at the backside of the street organs in Amsterdam. I was "watching the holes go by" and I carefully listened to what sound was produced at the same time.

I must have studied 1,001 books running through the keyframe, while I enjoyed the arrangements of the best people who had worked for the Dutch street organs, like Carl Frei, Romke de Waard, Gerard Razenberg and Piet Maas. Later on I learned to know the dance organs and I studied in the same way the music books of the better Belgian arrangers, who often surprised me with their musical inventions.

As there is no school or textbook of "how to arrange music for mechanical organs," the only way to learn this skill was to discover how others had made their arrangements. When I made my first books, the organ itself was my best teacher!

Today it should be easier to learn the secrets of arranging, comfortably sitting before my computer, and watching the piano roll view in Cakewalk, I can follow the pattern of the holes on the screen and listen to the sound which is produced. Although, in this way I will miss the charm of a real organ and the comments made by the Amsterdam organ grinders, who were very attractive in my learning period in Amsterdam.

As Tim Trager pointed out, there is a rush to "computerize" mechanical organs and to lay the book music aside! I agree with the advantages of MIDI-fication of organs for the following reasons:

(1) You don't have to carry heavy cardboard books

(2) You can choose on your remote control every tune you want to hear

(3) You can obtain new music quicker and cheaper

(4) You don't even notice the difference between music produced by a book or by a disk with midi-files, et cetera.

But, in this way, you will miss the enchanting atmosphere which belongs to old-fashioned big cardboard books. I prefer the smell of cardboard and shellac to the synthetic smell of a floppy disks. Therefore I am sure that many traditional organs never will be computerized. But to produce new arrangements the computer certainly is a helpful medium.

*Commentary seen on MMD
29 Sep 2000

Tom Meijer lives in Goes, Netherlands, where he not only arranges music for the street and fair organ but also holds the position of Editor of *Het Pierement*, the journal of the Dutch street organ association, the Kring van Draaiorgelvrienden (KDV).