

“De Waterporter” Remembering a Classic European Street Organ

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There are many well known street organs in Holland with interesting and historic backgrounds. Among them, the name *De Waterpoorter*, is recognized by many as one of the best. Built in 1904 by Ansalme Gavioli, an Italian barrel organ builder with a factory in Paris, *De Waterpoorter* began its life as a 92-key dance organ.

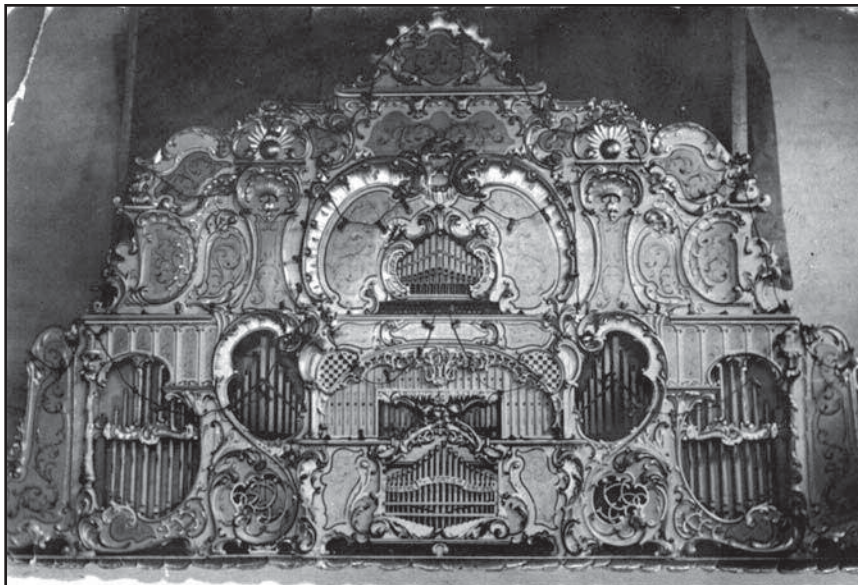


Figure 1. *De Waterpoorter* as a 92-key dance organ (with original façade).

Theophiel Mortier (1855-1944) was operating a café in Belgium during the early 1900s and was one of Gavioli's best customers. He always kept a large dance organ in his café and would offer it for sale when someone showed interest. As one organ sold, he would order another from Gavioli. Mortier would build the façades for the organs and maintained a small workshop with several employees mostly engaged in repair work.

De Waterpoorter was one of these organs that combined a Gavioli organ with a classic Mortier dance organ façade (Figure 1). As the organ business became more lucrative for Mortier, he developed an interest in building his own organs rather than purchasing them from Gavioli. Not wanting to lose his best organ customer, Gavioli obtained patents on various components and won a court case that temporarily prevented Mortier from building his own organs.

In 1908, Theophiel established the Mortier organ company when Gavioli could no longer meet his demand for new organ orders. By 1918, Mortier was well established in the organ business, building some of the most beautiful large classic dance organs ever produced.

During these early years, *De Waterpoorter* provided music and entertainment in various Belgian dance halls. After World War I, it left Belgium, having been sold to a dance hall in Tilberg, Netherlands, where it remained for

many years. After World War II, the interest in large, classic style organs was declining and *De Waterpoorter* endured a period of neglect. In 1956, an organ enthusiast from Sneek, Belgium by the name of Rinnert de Jager bought the organ. De Jager brought the organ back to Belgium and contracted the Mortier firm to transform it into a

much smaller organ for concert use at the Artmists of the Socialist Society for the people's entertainment in Ghent.

In 1957, De Jager enlisted the help of Jack Minning of Rotterdam to completely overhaul the organ for use on streets. Minning revoiced the pipes, added bourdons, changed the register arrangement and reworked and repainted the façade. De Jager selected the name *De Waterpoorter* for his redesigned organ and this name has been carried along to the present time.



Figure 2. A painting of “The Water Gate” at Sneek, Belgium. Translated this is *De Waterpoorter* which is the current name of this European street organ.



Figure 3. *De Waterpoorter* mounted on a 1953 Renault truck.

De Waterpoorter, translated to English, means, “The Water gate.” Before 1940, the small towns in Belgium charged a toll to pass through the canals. The toll was collected at a gate on the canal. A painting of the water gate at Sneek currently appears on the lower center portion of the *De Waterpoorter* façade (Figure 2).

Jan Van Heijenoort of Eigendom acquired the organ for a brief time in the late 1950s and sold it to A.B. Theunissen of Schiedam in 1959. Once again the organ underwent some transformation, mainly to the registers to suit Theunissen’s personal taste. In 1971, Theunissen sold the organ to G. Perlee of Amsterdam. Perlee rented the organ out for street use in Holland from 1971-1973.

On a business trip to oversee one of his business enterprises in Holland in 1973, Dr. William Murphy, Jr. of Miami, Florida accepted an invitation to visit Mr. Perlee. At this time, Dr. Murphy was not an organ enthusiast but had been told about some of the small organs that Perlee owned and his interest in how things work led to a meeting with Perlee. During the tour of the Perlee premises, Dr. Murphy spotted the *De Waterpoorter* and asked to hear it play. His interest in the organ peaked immediately and a purchase deal was finalized. Dr. Murphy kept the

organ in Holland and rented it out for 10 years before bringing it to the U.S.

De Waterpoorter arrived on American soil mounted on the rear open deck of a 1953 Renault truck with a European style frame/canopy system, to protect the organ in the event of inclement weather, where it remains today (Figure 3).



Figure 4. Arthur Prinsen rebuilding the glockenspiel on *De Waterpoorter*.



Figure 5. Dr. William Murphy observes as Arthur Prinsen inspects one of the organ's pipes.

Dr. Murphy has owned the *De Waterpoorter* for the past 36 years and uses it several times a year for parades and events at Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden. Josef Pommer performed some restoration work on the organ in 1989-1990 and Arthur Prinsen makes regular visits to Murphy's workshop to make adjustments, repairs and perform tuning.

The author accompanied Mr. Prinsen to the Murphy home in October 2009 to go over the organ and prepare it for a November showing. The necessary work at that time included tuning the entire organ, consisting of 345 pipes, adjustments, and rebuilding the glockenspiel (**Figures 4 & 5**).

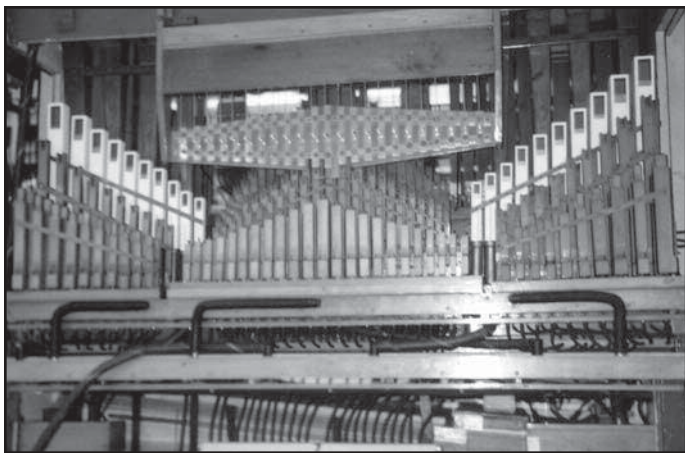


Figure 6. An interior view of some of *De Waterpoorter's* 345 pipes.

The *De Waterpoorter* scale consists of eight bass and trombones, 10 accompaniments, 23 melody and 20 count-

er melody notes (**Figure 6**). The 84-key scale on this organ is not a standard fairground scale. Components include violins, saxophones, cellos, bourdons, trumpets, trombones, vox celeste, unda maris, bass drum, snare drum, wood block, cymbal, carillon and bells. There are 12 registers.



Figure 7. A partial view of the book library.

Dr. Murphy maintains an extensive library of book music (**Figure 7**). Arrangements are by Arthur Prinsen and the late Gerhard Razenberg. Following a 1995 tuning by Arthur Prinsen, Dr. Murphy commissioned Al Jewer, of Laughing Cat Studio in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, to produce a two volume set of digital recordings of the *De Waterpoorter* entitled "The Grand Gavioli Organ."

The **centerfold** reveals a closeup of this freshly restored and well-maintained European Street Organ.

Special thanks to Dr. William Murphy, Jr. for providing information plus a picture of his organ; and Arthur Prinsen for the historical background and pictures of the *De Waterpoorter* while it was in Europe.

Bill Hall serves on the board of directors of the COAA and maintains a collection of five European organs at his home in St. Cloud, Florida. He met Arthur Prinsen in 1969, when he purchased his first organ, and they have maintained a friendship over the 40 year period.