

Historical Article

How is an Organ Music-Book Made?

Leonard Grymonprez

I would like to tell you something about the making of an organ music-book, a process that appears to be a mystery to many. I have often seen the puzzled faces of people watching the music-book passing through the key-frame and wondering how it is made. To get it ‘straight from the horse’s mouth,’ some years back I

visited Mr. Arthur Prinsen, the well-known Belgian composer and arranger of music for book-operated orchestrions, band organs, and dance organs, who lives and works at Brasschaat.

I will try to explain the making of a music-book step by step. Mr. Prinsen starts with the arrangement of the melody [Figure 1—Editor

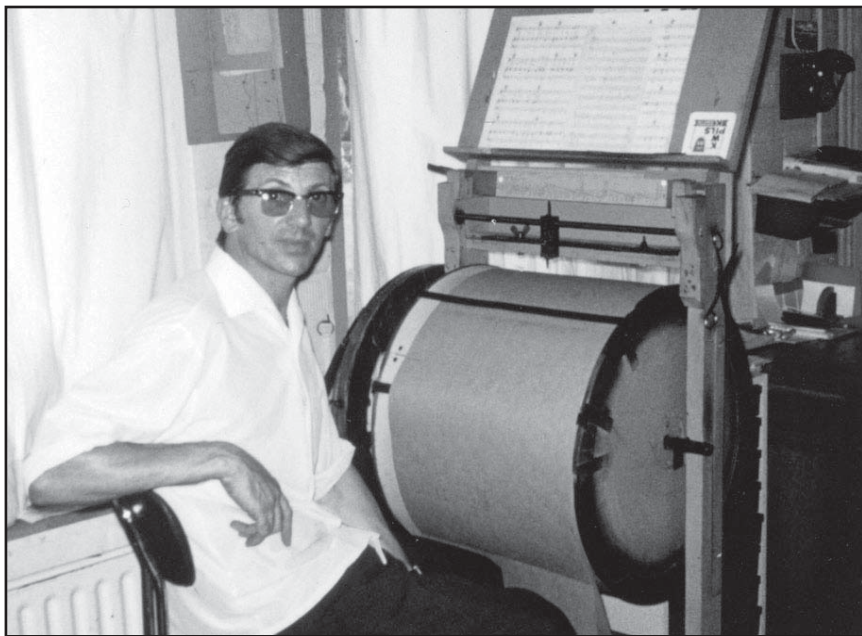


Figure 1. A young Arthur Prinsen at the Noteertrommel (circa 1980s).

added]. This means, he writes his organ arrangement in ordinary music script. On the Continent, the customers mainly ask for present day popular tunes; but often they ask for waltzes and marches and overtures, and sometimes for operas, which are real musical masterpieces.

When the arrangement is finished, it is transferred to the

“Noteertrommel” (Figure 2). This machine has a large horizontally pivoted drum in a frame. A piece of parchment about 3.5 feet long is fitted tightly around the surface of the pivoted drum. The drum is made of wood and covered with a thin layer of rubber, into which pins can easily be pressed. On the left side of the drum is found the disc on which are placed the brass trips for indicating the rhythm (fox trots, waltzes, marches, and others).

Horizontally, just above the drum, is mounted a brass comb, which is a true copy of the well-known brass comb, as found in a key-frame, in which the metallic keys operated (Mr. Prinsen can cover as wide as a 125-key scale with his

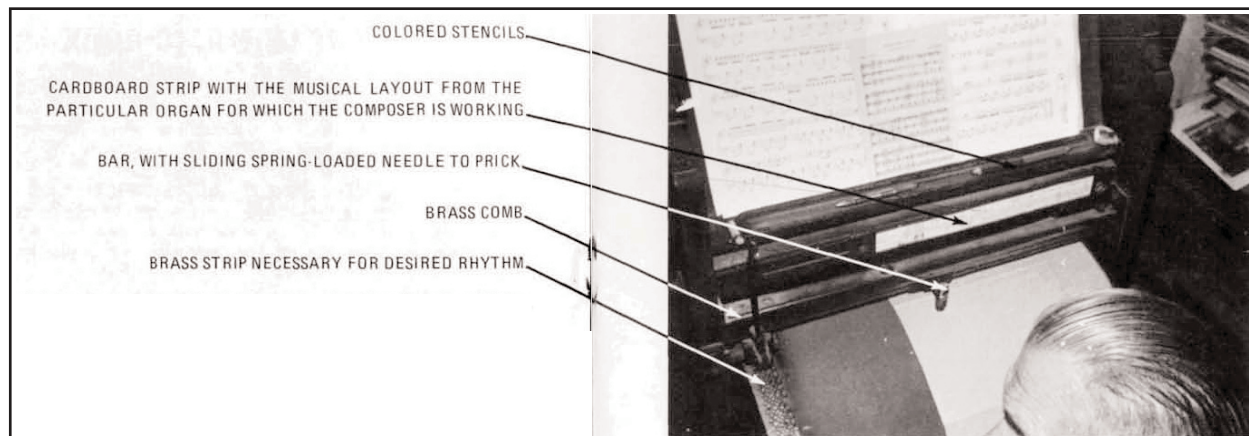


Figure 2. Mr. Peersman at the Noteertrommel, or composer’s drum. Instead of a thin rubber layer on the drum, there is a felt layer. Also, in this instance the pricks are applied directly to the blank cardboard.



Figure 3. Oscar Grymonprez, the author's father, Charles Hart of St. Albans Organ Museum, and Eugene Peersman, Antwerp composer, standing at the punching machine. The cardboard is in place, ready to be punched out by foot, hole by hole.

comb). Mounted in front of this comb is a bar on which the punch device slides. This device contains a spring-loaded needle, for marking the parchment below. Above the brass comb is mounted the "gamma," or scale, of the particular organ for which Mr. Prinsen is working. For each note the arranger makes two pricks. The space between is determined by the length of the note and is marked with blue, red, green, black, or orange stencil, according to whether it is for basses, accompaniment, melody, counter-melody, drums, stops, or cancels.

When the entire arrangement is finished, each numbered sheet of parchment is placed on new, blank cardboard, transferred to the punching machine, and punched out by foot (both parchment and cardboard at the same time). **Figure 3** Albert Decap is the only arranger known to possess a mechanical, pneumatically operated punching machine [at the

time this was written (1972)—ED]. The punching of the master parchment is very precise work. Careless work ruins everything, and the music would sound awful.

These master copies are then placed in order on the familiar zigzag blank cardboard, and with a stencil brush, a copy is

made, and the blue-liquid-stenciled zigzag cardboard, now ready for punching, goes into the punching

machine (this happens with "standard" scales). The stainless-steel punches are either circular (as found on German-made organs) or rectangular (in various lengths, according to whether it is for a keyless or a key-operated organ).

After the final punching of the entire music book, a coat of shellac is applied to the under-side of the music book to harden it [for keyed organs only—ED]. The music book is left on one side in zigzag position to dry out for two days, after which it is ready for use. Some composers have a special place to store their master copies of an immense range of organ musical layouts, as they are invaluable and replaceable [I was shown this 'special place' in Carl Frei, Jr.'s attic on a visit in 1993—ED] (**Figure 4**).

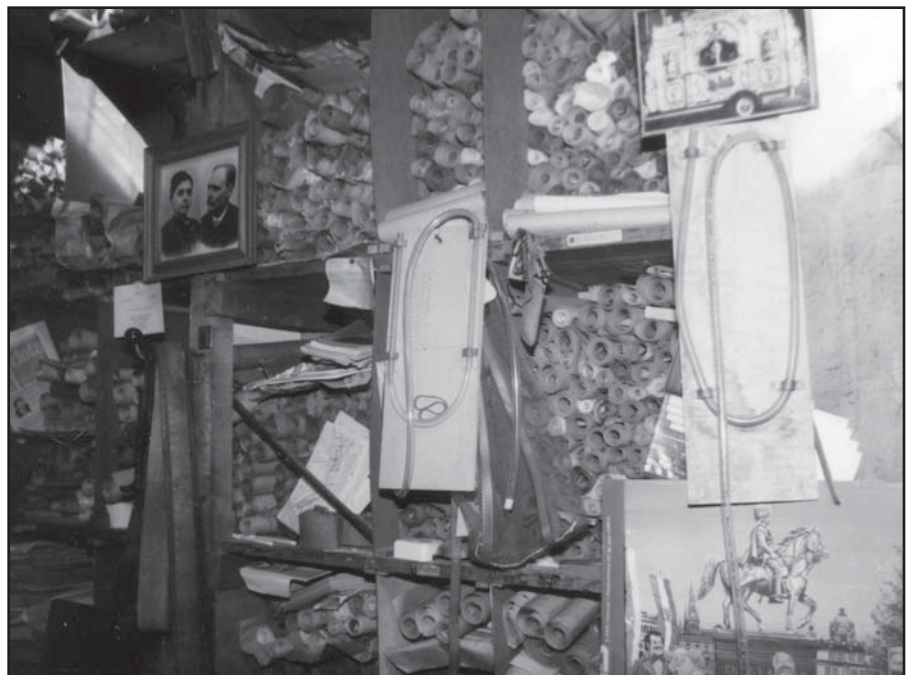


Figure 4. A view of the master copies stored in Carl Frei, Jr.'s attic in 1993.

This article originally appeared in the Music Box Society International's *Bulletin* (Vol XVIII, #4 – Spring, 1972). Additional photos (Figures 1 & 4) have been added by the editor to help illustrate certain points of interest.