

Remembering Carl Frei

Rein Schenk

My memories of Carl Frei date back to the early fifties of the past century. As a child I can remember street organs coming regularly to the neighborhood in Amsterdam where I lived. I was about six years old when I became interested in those curious instruments that appeared in our street. They would



Figure 1. A 90-key street organ by Carl Frei, the *Negentiger*.

appear several times a week. Three men would be busy moving the organ on a three-wheel wooden push cart. One man turned the handle to play the music. I watched the organ book moving through the mechanism with astonishment. It was great fun, particularly on Saturdays, because then the organ group of Klaas Swildens appeared in the busy shopping street, not far from where I lived, with the first Carl Frei organ that I must have heard. At the time I didn't know that this was the famous *Negentiger*, the first large 90-key street organ of Carl Frei (Figure 1). It was built in 1930 and in those days it was the property of the Amsterdam organ leaser Henk Möhlmann (Figure 2). In 1952 its place was taken by the street organ *De Klok*

which was also an organ of Henk Möhlmann's. Gradually I fell in love with *De Klok*. It was a smaller organ than *De Negentiger*, but there was a remarkable sound relationship. Later on it became clear to me, that this organ also was bought from Carl Frei in the late twenties, although originally it was a Mortier organ (Figure 3). I was very shocked when this organ was sold to Australia in 1976.

In the 1950s there were still about 15 organs playing in the streets of Amsterdam, mostly owned by the Amsterdam organ letters Henk Möhlmann and Gijs Perlee (both grandsons of the founder of the rental of the typical Dutch street organs: Leon Warnies). Those organs were all built before the Second World War. Later on I learned that a lot of those Amsterdam street organs came out of the factory of Carl Frei in Breda, like *De Cello* (Figure 4*), *De Snuffel*, *De Hindenburg* (Figure 5*), *De Duif* (Figure 6*), *De Blauwe Gavioli* and *De Puntkap*. To hear other Carl Frei organs we went to Rotterdam (*De Pod*, and later also the *De Cementmolen*) or The Hague, *De Bloemenmeid* (Figure 7*). Further well known Carl Frei street organs at that time were *De Vijf Beelden*, *De Blauwe Trom*, *De Vliegende Vleugel*, *De Sik*, *De Kleine Radio* (Figure 8*), *De Lekkerkerker* (Figure 9*) and *De Dubbele Biphone*. Most important was that those organs still had a lot of music arranged by Carl Frei, amongst them even authentic compositions.

The organ grinders were very careful with those old, pre-war, often worn-out books. In those days the Amsterdam tenants (renters) got six new books a year



Figure 2. Henk Möhlmann, seen in front of his business in 1953.



Figure 3. *De Klok*, as viewed in 1952.

from the organ-owners. But after Carl Frei left Holland in 1945 other arrangers had to take care of the new repertoires. And because they had to earn their frugal daily bread with the newest hits, the tenants preferred that the new books were of popular songs of the day and not new copies of old songs (however they loved to hear that music the most).

Later on the old books were handled with less care. Particularly in the sixties and seventies the old Carl Frei music was often discarded. In these later years worn out books were not repaired anymore and on the fairs, the old Carl Frei music was used as “stop wood” to get the merry-go-rounds and other attractions on even horizontal level.

During my younger years I met a lot of old members of the organ world, all of them lovers of good old organs, mostly made by Carl Frei. Other organs were also popular, especially when these organs played Carl Frei music. At that time there were still plenty of organs on the fairs, amongst them organs of renowned factories such as Gavioli, Ruth, Bruder, Richter and Wellershaus. These organs also played music that was arranged by Frei in the twenties and thirties. Gradually those organs disappeared from the fairgrounds as they were replaced by electronic sound machines, which were a lot cheaper and needed less maintenance.



Figure 10. Carl Frei, circa 1934.

So early in my life I heard a lot about Carl Frei (Figure 10); about the organs he had built or rebuilt; and especially about the magnificent arrangements and his own compositions he made (especially and exclusively for the mechanical organs). I was very impressed by the admiration the older organ grinders had for the work of Carl Frei. Unfortunately a number of the above-mentioned Carl Frei organs became lost due to export and incompetent restorations and rebuilds.

Because of the war Carl Frei, being a German, had to leave Holland in 1945—his factory and all the properties within it were confiscated by the Dutch government. All of the music patterns of that time were lost. There must have been thousands of arrangements. What precisely happened with them has never been exactly clarified. There are rumors that all that beautiful music had been destroyed by the American and French liberators. To me this was enough reason to try to save (and preserve) as much as possible of Carl Frei’s work by keeping up the old, discarded and often almost worn-out organ books. In this way the musical heritage of Carl Frei could be partly preserved for prosperity. In the last 40 years I have succeeded to save over 2,000 of his arrangements.

Restorations

In the first decades after World War II several owners put a lot of energy in restoring their old pre-war organs. Of course the organ leasers first took care of their rented organs so that they were kept in good condition. In addition many fair organs were regularly overhauled. At that time Carl Frei had already started a factory in Waldkirch together with his son, but this was not very useful for us in Holland. The distance was too great—a good reason to put lots of energy in preserving what was made by Carl Frei in Holland before 1940 (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Carl Frei in Waldkirch in 1954.

Since 1958 I regularly visited the workshop of the Amsterdam organ leaser and restorer, Henk Möhlmann, whom I often helped in my free time repairing his organs and punching new books. From the beginning I was enthralled by the technique and the musical possibilities of the mechanical organ. Henk Möhlmann had a great preference for the Carl Frei organs. In the twenties and thirties he was an important customer of Carl Frei as a buyer of street organs, just like his uncle Louis Holvoet in Rotterdam and his Amsterdam competitor, Willem van Jaaren. For them Carl Frei was the only supplier of organ books.

In 1961 I made acquaintance with Arie Meijer, every inch a lover of Carl Frei organs and of the Frei music. He regularly visited Carl Frei in Waldkirch. There, and in other places in Germany, Mr. Meijer made many tape recordings of the Frei organs. In that way we became used to the sounds of the new Frei organs which mostly were built in Waldkirch for the fairgrounds. Together with his son, Carl Frei went on developing new sound idioms for his organs as he had successfully done before in Antwerp and Breda. In spite of setbacks by wars and difficult times of crisis and reconstruction the firm Frei in Waldkirch kept building new organs and making new arrangements. The more I became acquainted with the cultural heritage of the old Mr. Frei the more I felt the need to meet him personally. And I had to be quick, because he was already an old man.

The more I became acquainted with the cultural heritage of the old Mr. Frei the more I felt the need to meet him personally.

In 1963 I came in contact with Carl Frei Jr. The famous English collector of steam engines and organs, George Cushing, wanted to buy a big organ in Holland and asked me for advice. I knew Mr. Cushing from several years earlier because Henk Möhlmann and I did some repairs at his organs in Thursford. His wish seemed to me a good opportunity to induce him to have a new big organ built by Frei, comparable with the big 112-keyless Carl Frei organ owned by the German showman, Barth. In correspondence with Carl Frei Jr. I organized the contacts between him and Mr. Cushing. Mr. Cushing proceeded to order a big organ, the first and only organ that the Frei firm had ever made for England. When the organ was ready in July, 1965, Carl Frei came to Thursford to assemble the organ. Mr. Cushing invited me to attend the first concert and it was there that I met Carl Frei Jr. (**Figure 12**). There we made the appointment so that I could come to Waldkirch the next summer, after my duty as a soldier, to work in the factory during my holidays.



Figure 12. George Cushing, Rein Schenk and Carl Frei Jr. at Thursford in 1965.

To Waldkirch

In the summer of 1966 I travelled to Waldkirch with Arie Meijer. I had made an appointment with Carl Frei Jr. so that I could work a few weeks in his workshop—sort of a working holiday. That summer I finally made an acquaintance with Carl Frei Sr. and his wife. Arie Meijer brought me to their house at the Schwarzenbergstrasse, where I spoke with him for the first time (**Figure 13**). To me this was a revelation.

After I gave him appreciation for his work he surprised me by acting very modestly. He said his music was just a game with intermittent counter melody: “I just did something” he said repeatedly. (I learned however, that my interest in his work was much appreciated). We had long conversations about his time in Holland; about the organs he built (often in very difficult circumstances of the lean years of depression); about the buyers of those organs (the organ renters and the showmen); and about the music he wrote and composed. It was never enough for me. Our meetings would be at his pub “Der Felsenkeller,” only a few minutes walk from his home. Then I would accompany him back to “die Heimathütte,” on the hilltop at the Schwarzenbergstrasse and we went on with the discussions at his home.



Figure 13. Rein Schenk and Carl Frei meeting in Waldkirch, 1966.

Highlights of the visits at the house of Carl Frei were always the private piano concerts in which he played one after another of his own compositions, among which melodies I had heard many times on the organs in Holland. Once a miraculous event occurred when I asked Carl Frei if he could play the march *Im Kinomatograph*, one that he composed in 1933 for organ and which is still part of the Dutch organ repertoire. He answered that

he did not know that march and asked me if I could sing a few bars. After my shy singing he played the march from the beginning to the end without any mistake.

Later that year, when I was working again at Frei Jr's factory for a few months, I continued the visits on the Saturday afternoons of which I keep many dear memories. During one of those visits Carl Frei Sr. proudly showed me bundles of sheet music written down of pieces he had composed. It was very amazing—there were also notebooks with poems, and texts in verse—all probably used for his songs. In those last months of 1966 Carl Frei Sr. regularly visited the workshop in the Kandelstrasse, in spite of his bad eyesight. He obviously could not leave the organ building behind completely. Those visits also gave me great pleasure, because there always was a moment in which we could speak about the old times.

I am glad that I spoke to him several times in the last year of his life and I keep very deep and dear memories of an unpretentious man, but to me a great artist.

Epilogue

The merits of Carl Frei as related to Dutch organs are hard to describe adequately. I am firmly convinced that without him there would not be any street organ culture in Holland that is worth mentioning. Dozens of organs were built and rebuilt by Carl Frei to play in the streets and on the fairgrounds. With a limited disposition and only a few registers he was able to reach a maximum of sound possibilities by using striking sound contrasts, and a refined pipe sound and sophisticated voicing. Although they have a similar sound idiom, all his organs have their own recognizable character, even the organs with similar dispositions. The four registers of Violin, Violin-Céleste, Bourdon and Undamaris form the base of the sound wealth of the Frei organs. It is the merit of Carl Frei that he presented an organ as an instrument with its own character and own abilities. Unlike others he considered the mechanical organ not as a surrogate organ or a super accordion, and certainly not as an imitation of an orchestra but rather, as an unique instrument.



Figure 14 is the Parlophon label record is of *De Witte* playing the *Louis Holvoët March*.



Figure 15, on the right, is a Columbia recording of the *Cello* playing the *Amsterdam March*.

Carl Frei combined his musicality with thorough training, and composed and arranged out of the organ sound sphere. As an arranger Carl Frei was unique; none of his contemporary arrangers could match him. In addition he composed very well-sounding compositions for organ, in which they were, and still are, unique. Fortunately, in the pre-war years a number of recordings were made of the most beautiful Carl Frei organs. On those old 78 rpm records (with labels of long forgotten record marks) we already can hear Carl Frei compositions and arrangements (**Figures 14 & 15**). One can recognize these arrangements between the old melodies immediately, because by then they were already remarkably different and distinctive.

Thanks to Wolfgang Brommer, Editor of *Fest im Takt—Kompositionen von Carl Frei sen*, Waldkirch Organ Foundation for permission to reprint portions of his book for this article.

I was interested in organs since my early youth. I have been collecting 78 rpm records of street organs. The collection comprises 750 records. I have been a member of the committee of the Dutch Society (KDV) for 13 years. Since 2005 I am the President of "National Fonds Draaiorgelbehoud" (National Fund for the Preservation of Mechanical Organs). Since 1996 I have been the owner of an original 52-keyless Alfred Bruder organ.

Carl Frei—produced street organs



Figure 4 (top, left). *De Cello* as photographed in 1962.
Figure 6 (middle, left). *De Duif* as seen in 1960.
Figure 8 (bottom, left). *De Bloemenmeid*, 2008

Figure 5 (top, right). *De Hindenburg* [currently in the Speelklok Museum, Utrecht, Holland—Ed]
Figure 7 (middle, right). *De Kleine Radio* in 1929
Figure 9 (bottom, right). *De Lekkerkerker* [this organ was the featured organ outside of the Elztalmuseum in Waldkirch, 2011 OrgelFest—Ed]