

A Bursens Organ Comes To California

Andrew Pilmer

Ron Wolf, of San Diego, California, recently took delivery of a 68-key Bursens street organ from A.C. Pilmer Automatic Music Ltd. of York, England. Here are some interesting details about the Bursens family and their products.

Joseph Bursens was born in 1867 and worked as an organ builder for Mortier in Antwerp. How he originally came into the mechanical organ business originally is not known. He was a typical hard-working Flemish man who, after a long day in the Mortier factory, built instruments on his own account in his own workshop. He rented the organs out during village fairs and similar events, and it sometimes occurred that he had to move an organ on a day that he should have been working for Mortier, so much so that on a certain day, Mortier gave him an ultimatum to either stop building organs, or leave his employ.

Bursens left around 1907 and for a time ran a dance hall in Antwerp until he found a suitable workshop where he started to build his own organs. He chose the Hoboken district of Antwerp (derived from the old name Hoge Beuken = High Beech Trees) and established himself in the St. Bernardsesteenweg. Joseph Bursens was one of the first to make organ card in Belgium, and at various times his wife and eight children were involved in gluing up the cardboard sheets ready for making up into books.

The business flourished building and rebuilding organs for dance halls in Belgium and street organs for customers in the Netherlands. Several of these Joseph Bursens street organs are still in existence such as the 54 key "Pipo," the 56 key now known as the "Carillon," the 64 key now in England originally known as "Carillon," and of course the famous 70 key recently restored in the Utrecht museum, "De Zeventiger."

In 1929 the company was taken over by Arthur Bursens, Joseph's youngest son, born in 1890. In 1904 he too had begun working at Mortier until his father established his own company. Around the time he took over the business, Arthur entered into partnership with one of his staff, Gustaaf Roels, and later the trade

name **Arburo** was coined from the partner's names i.e. **AR**thur **B**ursens and Gustaaf **RO**els. Some early organs bore simply the names of Bursens & Roels. The famous roll-playing dance organs were conceived at this time. The market was full of large dance organs, but Bursens saw an opening in small village cafés for a small, reliable and relatively inexpensive instrument. The key to this was the use of paper music rolls which could be made in quantity and sold cheaply, overcoming the principal complaint among those customers that book music was too expensive to buy regularly (and therefore keep up with the latest tunes).

Around 1930 the firm moved to other premises further along the same street, to no. 635, where Arthur would live and work to the end of his life. Business boomed until the outbreak

of war in 1939. A large staff made munitions boxes for a time but organ building resumed after 1945. Roels left the firm in 1950 to begin a sawmill business in the Belgian Congo. Frans de Groof took over his interest in the company, but the Arburo trade name, which had become well known, was retained. Indeed, the company often referred to itself as Orgelfabriek Arburo (Arburo Organ Company). The years after the war were especially busy, and it often occurred that the firm not only supplied the organ for a new café, but also built the bar and made the tables and chairs! Both book and roll-playing organs were built, the largest being 96-key café organs.

At this point it is worth clarifying the trade name "Ideal" which can sometimes be seen on book organs. This is not a mark of Arthur Bursens but of his elder brother, Alphons. Born in 1887, Alphons also worked for Mortier before joining his father. The circumstances surrounding the split are not known, but it was probably when the younger son Arthur assumed control of the family firm in

1929. Alphons had his own workshop in Violierstraat, Antwerp where he built book-playing dance organs in the well-known Bursens quality. The organs some-



Figure 1. The photograph shows a proud Ron Wolf (right) together with Russell Wattam (left) in front of the organ.

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times bore the logo “Swing Orchestra” and these instruments were built in association with the music arranger Urbain van Wichelen (who incidentally produced many Arburo rolls under the Swing label). The 84-key is still a common type in collections. Alphons died in 1967.



Figure 2. Close-up showing the melody pipework, glockenspiel and band mistress.

The popularity of juke boxes in cafés and changing tastes generally brought much less demand for Arburo products, but repairs and restorations kept the firm busy. Arthur Bursens did not want to introduce electronics into his products as other Belgian makers such as Decap had done and was to remain a builder of full-pipe organs along traditional lines. He would not even use electric blowers on organs, as he believed them to make too much noise. Frans de Groof died in 1967 and Arthur Bursens decided to retire. The story of the so-called “Bursens Warehouse Hoard” and its purchase by Q. David Bowers is well documented and need not be repeated here.

Figure 3. Keyframe with a music book in play. Part of the accompaniment and trombones can be seen.



Arthur retained the workshop, but soon found that retirement was not for him. First of all two small 38-key organs were made, both of which came to England. A demand existed for larger ones, and so a series of four new 52-key organs was built. All of these instruments came to the British Isles as well. Three remain there; one was later sold to Japan as part of the Schuhknecht collection. The 52-key organs had a brand new scale, 22 melody, 12 accompaniment and 8 bass, with registers for bourdon, violin and flute or trumpet on melody, and trombone on bass.

These compact organs were well received, being well designed and constructed, and to meet the continued demand, a new 68-key scale was designed in the early 1970s. The main advantage over the 52-key scale was the provision of a separate counter-melody section.

In all, about 17 organs were built on this scale, no small achievement for a man of advanced years. These lively instruments found new homes instantly in England and the United States. Four were even used commercially on the streets in Holland including the “Brabo,” the “Broodvechter” and the “Venlo.” Two are in private collections in Belgium. The last complete organ to be built and finished by Arthur Bursens was supplied to Turner's Musical Merry-go-Round, a large entertainment venue in Northampton, England (Figure 5). Because the organ parts had been built in series however, there remained components for one other, which was completed by Arthur Prinsen of Brasschaat and sold to a customer in England. Mr. Prinsen, whose wife is related to the Bursens family, played a large part in the late activities of Mr. Bursens, producing all the music books for the organs and often building decorative fronts in collaboration with Jef Ghysels of Brussels. Not all of the new 68-key Bursens organs were supplied with fronts from new however.

Arthur Bursens left behind a reputation for high-quality work and good technical design. Even after a lifetime of experience, he was still experimenting with new systems right up to

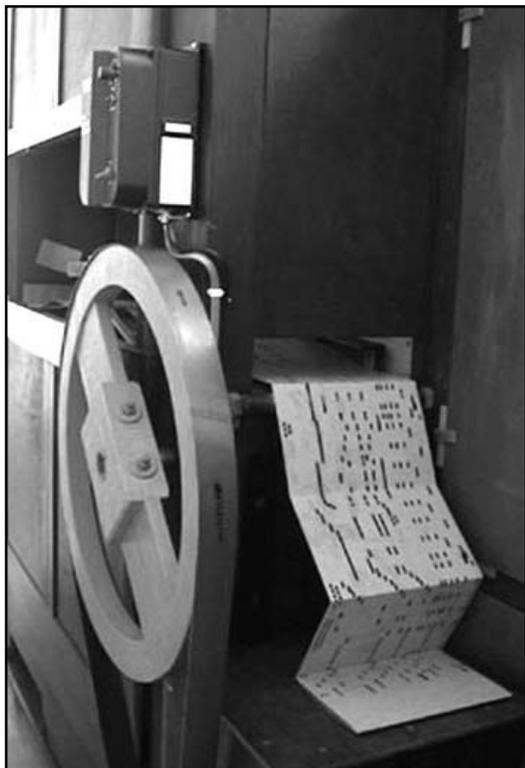


Figure 4. Rear of the organ showing wooden drive wheel and music book stacking up after being played.

the end. Because of this, hardly two Bursens organs are exactly alike in construction, although tonally there was a strong continuity throughout the years.

Ron Wolf, an enthusiast and collector, had been looking for a suitable street organ for his collection for some time and contacted A.C. Pilmer Automatic Music Ltd, to enquire if such an instrument was available there. Andrew Pilmer knew that Nigel Turner of Turner's Musical Merry-go-Round was seeking to reduce the number of organs there, and so purchase of the 68-



Figure 5. The organ just after completion in Bursens's workshop with Arthur Bursens in the foreground, Arthur Prinsen behind him on the left and Jef Ghysels, who built the front, on the right. Photo: Nigel Turner

68-Key Bursens Disposition

Melody: 22 notes g - e (chromatic):
Bourdon-Célèste, 2 ranks;
Violin-Célèste, 3 ranks;
Flute, 1 rank;
Glockenspiel. (connected to forte register)

Counter-Melody: 16 notes c - e (chromatic):
Voix-Célèste, 2 ranks,
Cello, 2 ranks.

Accompaniment: 10 notes g, a, -d chromatic, e, f, f#
1 rank stopped,
1 rank cello

Bass: 8 notes — C D E F G A A# B
1 rank stopped,
1 rank cello (under case),
1 rank Trombones (on forte register)

Percussion: Bass drum (plus cymbal on forte register), 2 x wood block (changes to snare drum on forte register).

Tremulant: all pipe registers in the melody division.

key Bursens was arranged (**Figures 1-4**). It left Northampton in early January, having helped to entertain more than a million visitors to the attraction since 1986, and was taken to the company's workshops near York. Here the organ was completely stripped down, cleaned and re-leathered. The bellows were still in excellent condition, a tribute to Mr. Bursens' workmanship. The disposition (table above) was slightly changed, the trumpet on melody being replaced with an open flute, and in the violin register one rank was replaced with one an octave lower. The façade underwent considerable change, a new top proscenium being provided, and three new larger animated figures were added (**Figure 1**). The whole was completely re-decorated and embellished where appropriate with gold leaf. Ron also ordered several new music books of his favorite European street organ tunes, which he had only previously heard on records and cassettes.

The organ was shipped from England in early August of 2000 and, after a long journey which took it over the Atlantic Ocean and through the Panama Canal to Los Angeles, was finally delivered to Ron's home in San Diego. Russell Wattam, workshop manager at A. C. Pilmer Ltd., who had done much of the work on the organ, flew out soon after and put the organ together, tuned it, and made all those other minor adjustments necessary to guarantee a first-class performance.

Andrew Pilmer has been in the mechanical music business since 1975, restoring large organs and producing music books for them. His company is based near the historic city of York, in the north of England.