

Figurines on an Organ

By

Hendrik H. Strengers

There has always been a strong relationship between magic and automata. More than 2000 years ago some automata were made to imitate the movements of human beings. On one hand the makers had the intention to create automata which could take the place of servants or slaves and, on the other hand, they sought after an effect of surprise, magic or even horror.

A famous example in the Middle Ages was the clock in the Near East – every hour the figurine of a prisoner-of-war was beheaded to indicate the course of time! In the 14th century we can find in Europe a more peace-loving method to strike the hours – a life-size figurine (frequently a blackamoor or a Turk) strikes a church bell with a hammer. We call these automata *Jaquemart*, or ‘Jack-of-the-clock.’

In many Western European towers you can still find these marvelous old automata. Famous examples are found in Venice (Italy) and Dijon (France). After the invention of the clockwork with wheels in the 13th century smaller clocks were built for very rich people to use in palaces, churches and so on. The 14th century showed the expansion of great clocks with automata, mostly with a religious background – the apostles bowing for Christ; the three Magi kneeling for the Holy Virgin and so on. Another example was the seven electors honoring their emperor Charles IV in Nuremberg (16th century).

A tendency came into being to create such presentations on a smaller scale. It is remarkable that technicians made so-called androids (human-like figurines) without clocks, but in the 16th and 17th century they combined these figurines with ships, animals and real showpieces. A highlight was the musician, the draftsman and the writer, constructed by Jaquet-Droz in the 18th century. At that time the first barrel organ showed up and after some period Ignaz Blasius Bruder I (1780 – 1845) made his now famous barrel organs with small moving figurines in the Black Forest in Germany. In wintertime the farmers could not work on the fields, so they made cuckoo clocks and clocks with automata, carved by hand from native kinds of wood.



De Bloemenmeid (the flower girl) – originally a Gavioli orchestration (pre 1914). This was then rebuilt by the Bursens firm of Antwerp, Belgium as a 67-key street organ in 1920. It was later converted to the 72-key Carl Frei system.



De Grote Radiokast (the large radio cabinet) – ordered from Carl Frei in Breda in 1929 by the firm of Möhlmann-Warnies. It is a 72-key street organ. Many parts came from the Bruder factory – the pipes came from Schön-

We do not know exactly the names of the wood-carvers but it is likely that organ-builders like the families of Bruder, Ruth, Gavioli and many others had their own carvers of figurines and automata. In the course of time the methods to set the automata in motion varied frequently: weights, ropes, pulleys (wheels and springs), pneumatic and even electric engines (don't forget hydraulic instruments of antiquity).

(Right) — *De Pallieter* – built by Alfred Bruder. This is playing the Ruth Style 33 scale. It was originally a fair organ.



The most famous carver of figurines was the firm of Demetz at St. Ulrich in South-Tyrol. Ferdinand Demetz (born on October 7, 1847 and died probably in 1896) studied at the Kunstakademie (Academy of Arts) in Vienna. He had 13 children including Vinzenz (1876-1951), who has created unequalled figurines, which are now in great demand because of their beauty and splendid colors. After the First World War the region of South-Tyrol was disconnected from Austria and added to Italy; so St. Ulrich is now named Ortisei.



Omke Romke ---originally built in 1912 by Limonaire as the “Spanish Lady.” It was restored by the famous firm of Perlee in Amsterdam and in 1959 renamed after the mentor of the Dutch authors on mechanical musical instruments Mr. Romke de Waard.

In the Black Forest there were many independent wood-carvers: Joseph Dopp (1860-1948), Balsler, Leonhard Dufner, Karl Friedrich Böhler (1861-1927) and Magnus Seeger. Fronts of organs were made by Robert Bichweiler (active 1883-1908), Willi List (worked for Carl Frei) and Fidel Heer (ca. 1808 in Vöhrenback) had already carved small figurines of wood nearly two centuries ago. This tradition still lives on. There are modern makers of figurines and capable restorers. A well-known maker of fair organ figurines is Mike Hart from England. Interesting is the use of new materials like polyester and other kinds of plastic, cast in molds and finished off in beautiful colors.

On organs the movements are limited to moving the head, playing bells, drums and triangles, all beating the time. The action is achieved by rather simple pneumatics and levers, but how effective it is! In my point of view there is still some magic in these almost living automata.

To give some examples I have included some photos made in the Netherlands in 1999 at organ gatherings in Delft (June 5th) and in the Open-Air-Museum in Arnhem (June 6th). The origin of most figurines is unknown but there are some very old ones showing their splendor for more than three generations!



A. Ruth & Sohn, model 36 fair organ – built before 1928. It was used originally in the autoscooter (ride) of Kunkels. It was restored in 1987 and owned by Verdonk.



De Brandweer (the fire brigade) – it was built in 1885 as a cylinder organ and named after a figurine looking like a fireman in 1910. It is a 56-key Limonaire organ, owned and restored by Perlee.

Hendrick Strengers resides in Delft, Netherlands, and frequently contributes to mechanical musical publications.



Future COAA Rallies

The **Emmett Kelly Clown Festival** in Houston, MO, will be the first time for COAA members to enjoy a rally in 2000. 30 to 40 clowns converge on this small Missouri town to help celebrate Emmett Kelly Jr.’s birthplace. We will have a “dude” ranch motel all to ourselves as well as their mess hall for use. The dates are May 5th and 6th and more information will be sent by separate flyer. **Dutch Village** in Holland, MI, will be a repeat tour for the COAA rally group and as always, will provide the perfect setting for our organs, both large and small. The Dutch Village family, as usual, extends their hospitality and this should be a fun rally. The dates will be June 23– 25, 2000 (Friday through Sunday). For more rally information, see page 22.