

Gebroeders Decap — Antwerpen, Belgie

A Short History

Roger Mostmans

The origins of the Gebroeders Decap firm

The Gebroeders Decap (Decap Brothers) organ building business was founded by Alois Decap who was born on the 4th February 1864. He was one of the five sons of farmer Livien Decap and his wife Sophie Mortier. Alois married Emma Verhaege, a daughter of Ludovicus Verhaege and Henrica Mortier. It is worth mentioning that both Alois Decap's mother and mother-in-law were called Mortier. Given that the surname Mortier is not common in Belgium, it is possible that there was a family connection with the famous organ builder Theofiel Mortier, especially as he was born in the same region as Sophie and Henrica.

Around 1888 Alois came with his wife and son Firmin to Ekeren, near Antwerp. Alois' brother Armandus also moved to the Antwerp area where he made melodeons, a kind of accordion. At first Alois worked the land, and to augment his earnings, played the accordion at fairs and in cafés. When his son Firmin was old enough, he went along with his father; this is how they both came into contact with mechanical organs. Around 1895 Alois began renting out and dealing in small organs which at first were delivered by dog cart and later by a mule and cart. By

1914 he owned five organs which together brought in 900 Belgian Francs rental income a month. When the First World War broke out his mule was requisitioned by the army. Later he acquired a horse to move the organs around with.

Alois Decap's marriage produced six children; Firmin was born in Merckem, Livien and Maria in Ekeren, and Frans, Léon and Camille were all born in the Esschenstraat in Antwerp, on

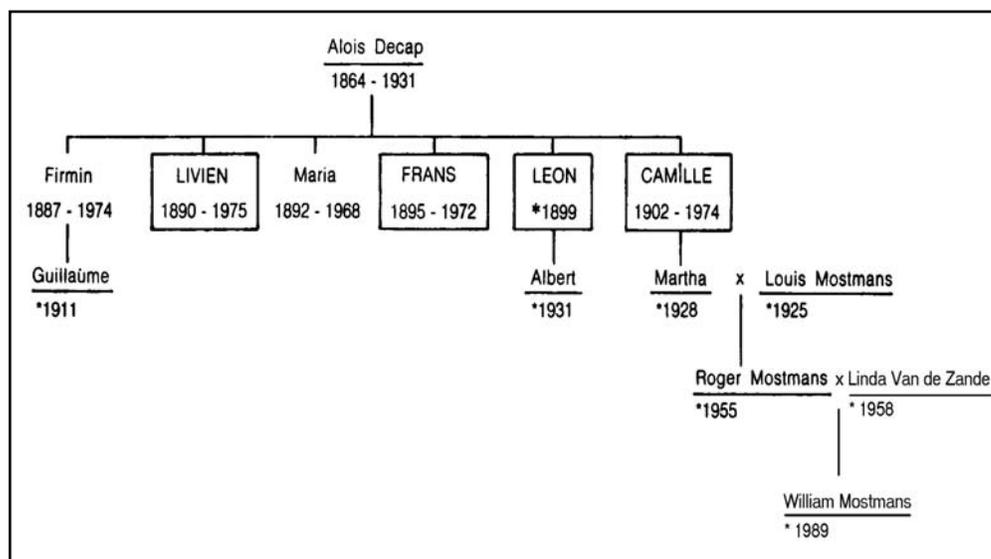


Figure 1. The Gebroeders Decap family tree.



Figure 2. A 52 key Decap street organ.

the site where the organ business would later be established. The company is still at this same location today, although the street has been re-named Essenstraat.

Livien, Frans, Léon and Camille would later form the Decap Brothers Company. Firmin became a bargee, Maria a housewife.

Alois Decap and his son Livien began building organs in the Essenstraat in 1902, initially in a modest workshop. Shortly after the First World War a partnership was formed after which the business was officially conducted under the Decap Brothers name.

The Decap Brothers established a true family business in which not only the first and second generations were involved, but also the third and fourth.

It is worth mentioning that Camille Decap's father-in-law made the three-wheeled carts for the many street organs which were built and exported to the Netherlands in the 1920's.

Frans Decap left the company in 1933; Livien retired in 1955 and Léon in 1970. In 1944 Camille Decap's son-in-law, Louis Mostmans joined the firm. He was a furniture maker by trade and specialized in making organ cases, fronts and later pipes.

Camille Decap took over the firm in 1970 and turned it into a limited liability partnership (PVBA). Camille's grandson

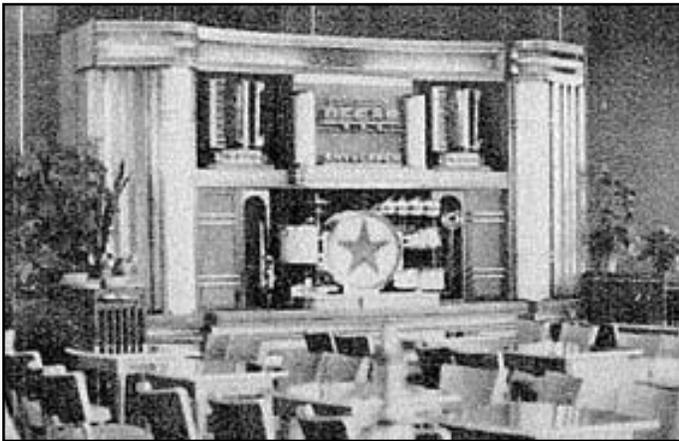


Figure 3. A historical photograph showing the 105-key *Dancing Star* dance organ on location in a dance hall.

Roger Mostmans joined the company in 1972. Since the death of Camille Decap in 1974, his daughter Martha, her husband Louis Mostmans and son Roger have formed the core of the business. In 1997 Decap Brothers became a limited company (NV).

Characteristics of the Decap organ

Decap Brothers have continuously tried to give their organs a unique character. Decap organs are immediately recognizable by their sound as well as their outward appearance.

Decap organs are immediately recognizable by their sound . . .

In 1933 the first self-playing accordions were introduced onto the organs; two years later in 1935 the first full drum kit was incorporated into an organ front. The next year, 1936, dummy saxophones were added to the fronts. In 1943 the wind supply was changed over from the traditional bellows to electric blowers, and the book wheel, enabling continuous play, was introduced in 1955.



Figure 4. Three action figures adorn the front of this 92 key Robot Organ.

Decap organs always have an extensive rhythm section comprising of a full drum kit and extra percussion instruments such as wood block, tambourine, temple blocks, maracas, etc., so that all dance rhythms can be achieved. Some organs include real xylophones or glockenspiels.

In 1953 we first used electronic sound-production in our organs and since then the use of electronics has become commonplace in them. Electronic control systems to replace perforated cardboard (with obvious advantages for commercial users) have also been introduced.

Notwithstanding these modern developments, the old pneumatic technology has remained, and in 1989 we began building traditional full pipe organs again.

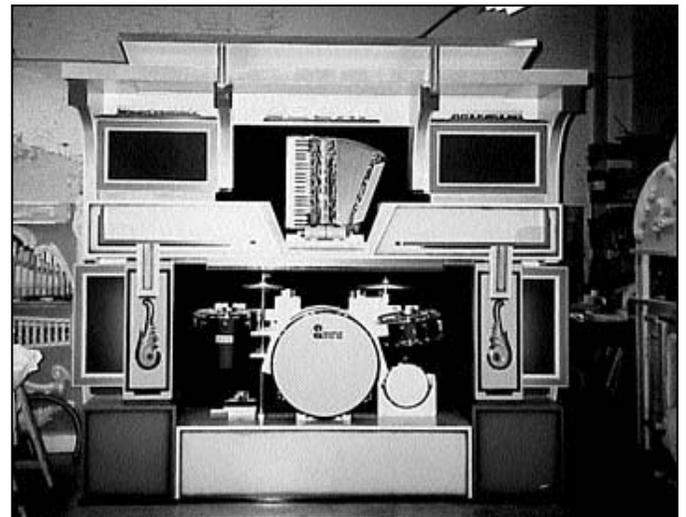


Figure 5. A 2000 (Retrostyle) midi dance organ.

The instruments

In 1902 Alois Decap and his son Livien founded an organ business which would grow to be one of the largest of its kind in Belgium.

At first they only repaired organs which they hired out, but later began to build fair organs for other customers. Gradually, the product range grew and over the years included roll and book playing orchestrions, fair organs, street organs, dance organs, electronic organs, Robot organs and combination pipe and electronic organs.

Eventually the scales and dispositions of the various instruments were standardized. The company built 72, 92 and 121 key pipe organs; 72, 92 and 105 key electronic organs; 92 and 105 key Robot organs and 105 key combination pipe and electronic organs.

In the 1980s computer control was introduced, as were accordion-playing figures; since 1989 52-key street organs have also been made. The first MIDI computer-controlled organ was built in 1996.

Roger Mostmans is the great grandson of Alois Decap and has helped run the Gebroeders Decap firm since 1972. He resides in Antwerp, Belgium, where the tradition of organ building continues.