

Bursens Centennial Celebration Hoboken, Belgium October, 2008

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During October 2008, the recently founded Belgian society, MechaMusica vzw (MEMU) organized a series of events to celebrate the 100th centennial anniversary of the beginnings of the Bursens organ factory. It was in Hoboken that Joseph Bursens, having worked previously for Mortier, started his own organ factory. There he built street and dance organs; and was later succeeded by his son Arthur, who also constructed the worldwide-famous Arburo-orchestrions.

an introductory lecture about Bursens and the exhibition, followed by a short speech by an official of the District of Hoboken. At the exhibition, visitors got the chance to view original material (such as a workbench) as well as designs for orchestrion parts, façades, and, factory photos from both the Joseph and Arthur Bursens period. All this was complimented by covers of LPs with recordings of Bursens instruments and other reference material. Particularly intriguing was a catalogue in which Bursens also advertised his quality furniture (like stereo cabinets), made in his workshop.

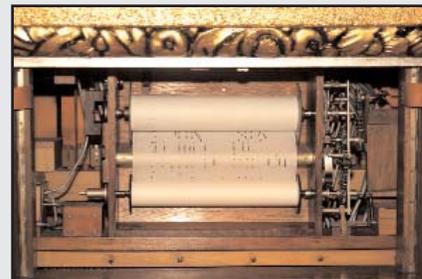


Figure 2. The Roll mechanism of Daniel De Bie's Arburo orchestrion.



Figure 1. Arburo orchestrion of Daniel De Bie.

On Friday 4 October 2008, in the Districtshuis [central district area - ED] at Hoboken, there was the festive opening of a special exposition (lasting a month) dedicated to the legendary manufacturer of dance organs. MEMU President Johnny Claes started the evening with



Figure 3. The *De Heen en Weer*.

On top of all this, five Bursens organs were permanently on display in the Districtshuis and were played alternately during tours, guided by volunteers like Arthur Prinsen and Gilbert Duerinck:

1. A fine, recently-restored Arburo-orchestrion of Daniel De Bie, playing old as well as new rolls (**Figure 1-2**)
2. The *Heen en Weer* of John Wempe (**Figure 3-4**)
3. The *Brusilia* of the Flemish Government (formerly in the Ghysels collection)

4. A small Arburo-reed-orchestrian on rolls, on loan from the museum in Utrecht.
5. The legendary Joseph Bursens-street organ *De Zeventiger*, also kindly loaned by the museum in Utrecht.



Figure 4. John Wempe at the keyframe of *De Heen en Weer*.

The exhibition drew many visitors from home (many of whom were former employees of the Bursens factory) and abroad; we even had enthusiasts traveling from Denmark and Switzerland!

The “big day” was Sunday, 6 October, which started with a group of enthusiasts (**Figure 5**) travelling with an antique tram (provided by Rudy Nijs) to Arthur Bursens’ former workshop at the Sint

Bernardsesteenweg 635. The purpose was to unveil a tablet commemorating the centennial of the Bursens organ factory (**Figure 6**). The event was accompanied by music from the 48-key Bursens street organ *’t Schapekopje* (**Figure 7**).



Figure 5. The antique tram which brought us to Sint Bernardsesteenweg 635

Unfortunately, the weather gods were not well-inclined towards us. It appeared they would remain so for the rest of the day. This was a pity, since Johnny Claes had managed to bring together not less than ten Bursens organs to Hoboken, which all played to perfection (**Figure 8**):

1. The 68-key *Sint Bernard* owned by the Claes family
2. Its sister-organ *De Zwaantjes* from Arthur Bursens’ granddaughter Lisette Defossé

3. From the UK came another 68-key organ: the *Westonian*
4. Also from the UK was the lovely *Carillon*, which had a fantastic repertoire (I really liked the rare arrangements of music composed by Albert Vossen)
5. Another one from the UK was: Francis Stapleton's *Harley Crossley*, rarely seen at rallies and placed on a trailer for this event (**Figure 9**)
6. From the Netherlands came the *Brabo*
7. Also from the Netherlands was the *Pipo*, with its distinct, old-fashioned street organ sound (**Figure 10**)
8. Another organ brought over by Dutch enthusiasts was the well-known *Veronica*, sporting a nicely painted façade (as far as I could tell)
9. A fourth organ from the Netherlands was *De Zwaluw*
10. From the far north of the Netherlands came the already mentioned *’t Schapekopje*, which was built in 1936 for the famous Dutch organ rental firm of Theo Denies in The Hague.

I might have missed one, but due to the rain and wind, I couldn’t make a full tour as I usually do at rallies. It was sometimes hard to fully enjoy the instruments, especially since many of them had to play while covered by canvas.

Nevertheless, it was a truly unique event, and many enthusiasts found their way to Hoboken. Judging from the reactions in the guest book at the exposition, they had a very enjoyable time (**Figure 11**). The author of this article did as well, and I especially enjoyed the amicable contacts with people like Shane Seagrave, Francis Stapleton and

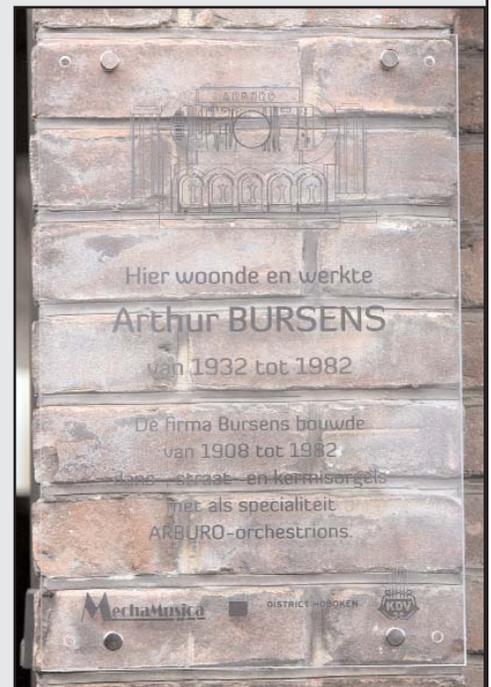


Figure 6. The commemorative tablet at Arthur Bursens’ former workshop.



Figure 7 (left). *Het Schapekopje*.

Figure 8 (above). MEMU President Johnny Claes prays to the weather gods in vain.



Figure 9 (above). The *Harley Crossley*. Photo: Nick Seymour.

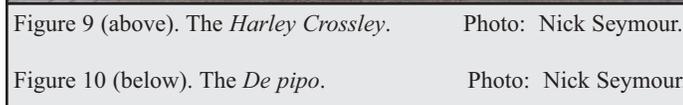


Figure 10 (below). The *De pipo*. Photo: Nick Seymour.



Figure 11. Arthur Prinsen signing the guestbook at the opening of the exhibition..

Nick Seymour, who truly have a heart for their Bursens organ!

During the second and third weekend of October, other successful events took place including a special concert on the organs in the Districtshuis, and shows by Luc Cuppens and Duo Doorgedraaid.

All this wouldn't have been possible without the hard work of MEMU's President Johnny Claes, a "die-hard" Bursens enthusiast, or without the cooperation of the KDV and the district of Hoboken. It was one of the first large events organised by MEMU, and I think we can safely say that it was a success. We look forward to the 125th anniversary!

All photos by the author except where noted.



Björn Isebaert is a Belgian enthusiast of mechanical music instruments, and particularly of Hooghuy's organs (see his website www.hooghuy.com). He's been involved with MechaMusica from the very beginning, and is now the secretary of this young Belgian society. His small private 'collection' includes a 36-key Verbeeck and a Wurlitzer player piano. He lives with his wife, two dogs, two cats, a horse and some fishes and chickens in Zingem, a small town near Gent in East Flanders.