

Nederlands Boekorgel Centrum or N.B.C.

Ron Schmuck

The partnership between Cris van Laarhoven and Anthony (Toon) Heesbeen has to be one of the best success stories for mechanical music in the last ten years. It is only four years ago that the partnership was formed and already they have accomplished more, in this short time, than some companies do in a life time. The perfect balance is two men, both in love with mechanical music and each with very different talents. Cris began his love affair as a collector of street, fair and dance organs, and Toon, as an organ builder and composer/musician. Toon's family name "Heesbeen" has been in the business of street, fair & dance organ building and restoration for many years. It was only natural for Toon to continue in the footsteps of his father. The proof of Toon's ability as an organ builder is in the wonderful instruments he has completed. He is a talented wood worker and, a musician and composer with a mechanical mind to invent new systems to use the very latest ideas in mechanical music such as MIDI. He is also well versed in the restoration techniques of the working historic instruments which still exist in the Netherlands. Cris is a well known and very successful businessman with a great deal of knowledge regarding the day to day challenges all business owners face daily (**Figure 1**).

Cris is presently 100% involved with the operations of the business. He is an artist and visionary, who respects the past, and has put a great deal of effort into the creation of a special business. He has built a new building which is a "monument"

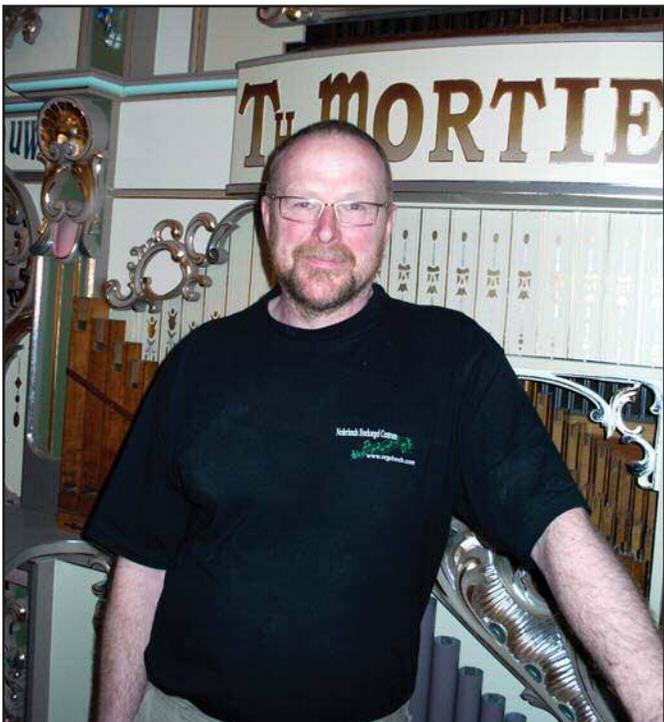


Figure 1. Cris van Laarhoven, the curator and owner of *Museum Dansat*, a monument of mechanical organs.

to mechanical music. Cris designed the entire building over the past few years! First, it was all drawn on paper including every detail from the style of chandelier to the design of the door knobs. He built a large model of the entire building, inside and out, making sure everything looked exactly as he wanted. He then transferred his ideas to the actual draftsman who would be making up the blueprints from which the builders would work. A great deal of government red tape had to be looked after, which again Cris did with great enthusiasm.



Figure 2. One of several entrances to the museum. Note the colorful art glass.

Long before a single brick was in place Cris had been collecting for the new museum including mirrors, carvings and antique hardware for the doors from various antique dealers around the country side (**Figure 2**). Several times I went with him to see various items being made by craftsmen in nearby villages. These craftsmen were still making items from iron and glass and had a vision of what they were doing was something very special. Blacksmiths, stained glass artists, cabinet makers, carpenters and carvers were all put to work with complete attention to the smallest detail.

This level of craftsmanship and attention to detail shows in every instrument they build new or restore. A partnership was formed with both men doing what they loved best, thus creating treasures for the future and preserving the instruments of the past.



Figure 3. The sign, “Nederlands Boekorgel Centrum” announces the name of the business.

The new business is called the “Nederlands Boekorgel Centrum” (N.B.C.) and is located in Hilvarenbeek, a beautiful and historic

village only a few miles from the larger city of Tilburg (Figure 3). When the new company began in 2003, business was conducted at Beerten 15, Hilvarenbeek. This building contained a showroom which was often used for setting up of the instruments prior to shipping. The workshops and offices were located on the second floor. It quickly became obvious that more space was required for the company to keep up with the orders for new instruments as well as the restoration of older instruments (which plays a large part in this business). Cris was always a fan of the old dance halls located in every city and dance tents that traveled from town to town all through the Netherlands and Belgium. These fascinating buildings and tents were pure magic, filled with beautiful carvings in gold leaf and colors only found in a dream. To add to the beauty they were complete with panels of crystal glass and beveled mirrors positioned everywhere. These crystals reflected every light to give the atmosphere of a dream making this a once in a lifetime experience never to be forgotten. Most of all it was the music to be found in these dream castles, that could only be produced by many musicians or a gigantic mechanical organ.



Figure 4. The dance floor of the museum comes alive with dancers, waltzing to the tune of the Mortier dance organ.

With this love of the dance palaces or Dansat as they were called, Cris began to design a building which had the magic of

the old crystal dance palaces of the past and, to serve as a museum and workshop to house those rare mechanical music instruments. It would be a place where the public could come and enjoy traveling back in time. A place where older people could relive old memories and dance on a real inlay hardwood dance floor as they did in their youth (Figure 4). It would, as well, be a place for younger people to learn about the past and experience the wonders that can only be found in a real crystal dance palace with a genuine dance organ playing. *Museum Dansat* was the name selected for this time capsule made of bricks and mortar.



Figure 5. The entryway into the *Museum Dansat*.

As you enter the property you pass through large fancy iron gates into a court yard. The entire building design is Art Nouveau, reminiscent of the famous Tuschinski Theater in Amsterdam (Figure 5). The entrance into the museum/dance room is designed that each person enters through a set of doors when opened, suddenly exposes the person to a picture of color, light and music. Crystal mirrors, giant chandeliers (Figure 6) all aglow. Beautiful instruments as far as the eye can see! Then comes the music that completely fills the room. The songs are from yesterday and today from the waltz or a Latin foxtrot to *Star Wars*! The museum/dance hall is 17 meters wide (55 ft. approx.) by 20 meters long (65 ft. approx.) and 18 meters high (59 ft. approx.).



Figure 5. A close-up view of one of the crystal chandeliers.



Figure 7. Originally a 59-key Marengi this beautiful and early organ has been expanded to 61 keys.

Located high over the entrance way is a stage which holds the very beautiful and musical Marengi organ (Figure 7). This organ originally had 59 keys but was extended to 61 keys some time ago. Cris purchased the Marengi in Switzerland and this was the first project that he and Toon worked on together. The date found in the bellows is 21 May 1902 and the serial number is 2002. This information makes this Marengi one of the oldest Marengi in the world, if not the oldest! The organ contains a total of 254 pipes which play as follows: the bass section consists of six keys playing 16-ft stopped pipes, cello basses, Barrette basses, trombone basses and bassoon basses; and the accompaniment is nine keys playing open and closed flute pipes.

The melody section is 17 keys and plays violin, clarinet and open & closed flute pipes. The counter-melody has 18 keys and plays saxophone, brass piccolo open & closed flutes and glockenspiel. Also included are a bass drum, cymbal and snare drum. The beautiful carving of a dancing lady makes this organ stand out and its present location gives the presentation it surely deserves.



Figure 8. An over all view of the dance floor displaying a fair, Dutch and dance organ.

Moving further into the room we see that Cris designed stages for the instruments to sit on (Figure 8). This idea really gives the instruments a strong presence. The instruments presently on display represent a great assortment of the different types of instruments that existed in the past. The organ that immediately catches our eye is at the far end of the room and is the giant *Mortier Dansat* a 90-key instrument which was built around 1925 and contains 580 pipes (Figure 9). This wonderful instrument was completely restored by N.B.C. in 2005. The fantastic facade on this *Mortier* is all new and was designed and built at N.B.C. This monster instrument completely fills the end of the room and goes from floor to ceiling with carvings and paintings that only an actual picture of the instrument could possibly explain.



Figure 9. The *Mortier Dansat*, a 90-key Belgium dance organ with 580 pipes.

The inside of the instrument is no less spectacular with pipe work everywhere the eye can see, The bass uses 12 keys which play the enormous wooden pipes that make the building shake. The accompaniment also uses 12 keys. The melody has 23 keys which play all sorts of unusual pipes such as baxophone, unda maris, vibratone, jazz flute, as well as the more familiar violins,

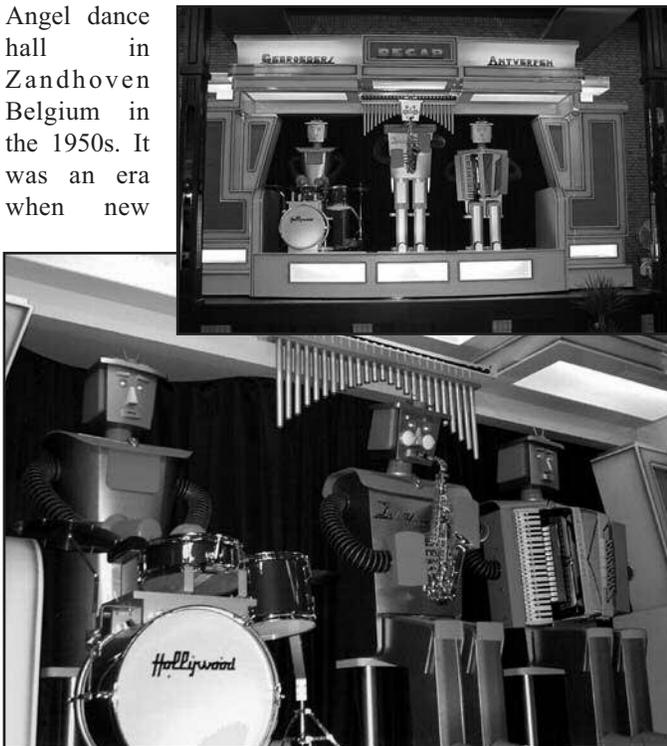
trumpets, and trombones. Also a xylophone is on the melody. The counter melody has 18 keys which plays 8-ft. flute, vox celeste, cello, saxophone, cello grave, open and closed flutes etc. On percussion we have a large bass drum, cymbal, wood block and snare drum. This one instrument would make a visit to *Museum Dansat* worthwhile, but there is more to see.



Figure 10. The 56-key *The Klok* has 249 pipes and is a circa 1925 Dutch street organ.

Looking to the left we see the famous and historic street organ called *The Klok* built in 1925. It has 56 keys and plays 249 pipes (Figure 10). The pipework is the traditional sweet Dutch sound. This is the type of instrument that was and still is being used in the streets of Amsterdam as well as other Dutch towns. The unique feature of this organ is a large bell which plays, giving it the name of *The Klok* or “The Bell” in English. This is the first organ with the name of *The Klok* and is very similar to the *Klok* Dutch street organ from Mohlman.

Sitting beside the *The Klok* is a Decap Robot dance organ (Figures 11 & 12) which features three very large robots which entertain us with a great assortment of polkas, marches and even boogie-woogie! New dances were on the way and this was one of the “new” space age instruments, complete with the latest breakthrough science had to offer back in 1950. This is a brand new instrument which was recently built by Decap together with N.B.C. in 2005. It has 105 keys and is the same model as the Decap Robot that was standing in the popular Blue Angel dance hall in Zandhoven Belgium in the 1950s. It was an era when new



Figures 11 & 12. The 105-key Robot Band, complete with three moving robots. This organ is identical to the Decap version made in the 1950s.

sounds were being introduced to the dance organs. The new sound was created by a Hammond electronic organ using sound generators to produce new and different effects. It could simulate the sound of the saxophone, trumpet and bourdon. This new electronic instrument could provide different levels of volume control for expression to the music, plus echo, vibrato and percussive effects. When the new sound was coupled to the traditional dance organ pipework, suddenly, everything was new again. New dances performed to this new style of music.

Needless to say, the instruments could still handle the older styles of dances without a problem. These new instruments in the 1950s still used a format that was very similar to the older dance organs. The bass used 12 keys as did the accompaniment. The melody is 27 keys and played the traditional jazz flutes, vibratone, etc. On countermelody there are 20 keys again playing jazz flutes, cello, plus the electronic voices of saxophone, trumpet, bourdon and accordion. An enlarged percussion department includes a bass drum, snare drums, tympani, tambourine, wood block, hi-hat cymbal, rhythm cymbal, cow bell, and triangle. Coupling the antics of three wild and crazy robots that do everything you would expect a band to do from outer space, and you had a party in the making and a new product in 1950 that every dance hall worth its salt had to have. When the Decap Robot was built, extra parts were made to complete two more Decap Robots, so if you are interested in owning one for your own *dansat*, then give Toon or Cris a call.



Figure 13. A 101-key Decap dance organ named *Jupiter*. It was originally a Mortier organ but was rebuilt by Decap.

Next is the beautiful 101-key *Jupiter* by Decap in 1953 (Figure 13). This instrument stood at the *Dansat Paraplu* in Zottegem Belgium. It actually began life in 1925, built by Mortier, it played for many years. It was rebuilt by Decap into this instrument, and then recently restored by N.B.C. It can really pound out the dance music from waltz, cha cha and (believe it or not) the jitterbug!

Finally, a true gem of an instrument, *The Harp* (Figure 14), a large 75-key street organ which was built in 2002 by Toon Heesbeen (commissioned by Cris van Laarhoven for his collection). The Harp is in the same scale as the famous street organ *The Arab* and the *Decap of Mina van Es*.



Figure 14. The 75-key street organ, *The Harp*, built by Toon Heesbeen in 2002.

The Workshop

Now let's head downstairs to the workshops. The staircase down to the shops is complimented by a large elevator allowing entire instruments to be moved up from the workshops to the loading area or through a door into the museum! The shops themselves are the same size as the museum with very high ceilings. One of the features of the shop is the large areas at both sides of the shop which extend up into the ceiling. They contain lots of windows allowing light into the the shops. These raised sections are actually the inside of the stages which are in the Museum room on the floor above. Cris thought of everything in the design of the building.

There is a custom humidifying system keeping the building at a constant 60 to 70 % humidity and can deliver five liters of water into the air in one hour! In the shops are offices and engineering rooms where new instruments are designed to the individual customers requirements (Figures 14 & 15).

One area of the workshop is completely enclosed where all the woodworking equipment is operated for a dust-free and well-organized workshop. There is a large horseshoe, or peacock style, façade of the new 92-key Limonaire organ which is well on its way to completion, and all built in the old tradition way of hand-carved parts and expertly fitted panels. N.B.C. is also on the cutting edge of new instruments that are purchased by various businesses in Europe and the United States for use in their operations. One such instrument presently being built is a 121-key midi-controlled dance organ called *The Super Nova*.



Figure 15. The workshop where new organs are being constructed.



Figure 15. Toon Heesbeen and Cris van Laarhoven at work in the workshop below the *Museum Dansat*.

This has a futuristic design with many special effects and surprises. These include a lighting system that is ever changing, with the music, and features every hue of color known. A TV screen shows the words to the song the organ is playing, and the organ offers a human voice singing the words to the song, just to mention a few of the features. The new instruments include the very popular 41-key *Queen Beatrice* and the 62-key *Clara Marie* Dutch street organs which will be delivered later this year. The restoration department is busy with several instruments being finished at the moment, one is the famous street organ, *The Negentiger*, built by Carl Frei. Awaiting restoration is a 72-key Decap Dance organ and several hand-cranked street instruments. Cris and Toon will be pleased to give you the full tour of *Museum Dansat* and the workshops on your next visit to the Netherlands. Instruments built by N.B.C. can be seen in the USA at Cooley's Olde Tyme Piano Shoppe, Hockessen, Delaware. (www.cotps.com) Be sure to visit the N.B.C. web site at www.orgelweb.com, or email at info@orgelweb.com, or the old fashioned way via phone. From the USA: 011 31 1350 50292.

Finale

This great assortment of instruments allows for a complete tour of music and styles that were to be found in the Dansats and streets of the Netherlands. The instruments in the museum are often changed so people returning are sure to find new and interesting instruments. The *Museum Dansat* is able to hold 100 people for events from tours to private parties. *Museum Dansat* is opened every second and fourth Sunday of the month from 1:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. The organs play in sequence and you will feel at home in the magnificent surrounding which guarantees a pleasant afternoon out.

Ron Schmuck is a full time restorer (since 1977) who enjoys working on all types of mechanical musical instruments. His true love, however, is the street, dance and fairground organ.