

Albert Decap 1931-2009

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On 16 May 2009 the organ world lost one of its most talented members, the music arranger Albert Decap.

Not only was Albert a great arranger and sometime composer, his music was synonymous with the “Organ Jazz” motif that was emblazoned on the bass drum of so many Gebroeders Decap organs and imitated by so many others. It was also the “A. Decap Sound,” perhaps the most successful brand of mechanical organ LPs ever created, which sold by the thousands over many years. Yet Albert himself was the very quietest of men, entirely content in his daily routine of arranging; only retiring from work in very recent times when his health made it too difficult to continue. Albert also represented the last of a very long tradition of Belgian arrangers whose primary business was simply producing organ books, mainly for dance organs; a reflection of the scale of such activities in times gone by.

Albert was born in Antwerp on 24 September 1931, the son of Leon Decap, one of the Decap brothers (“Gebroeders Decap”) famed for their organ building skills at their workshops in Essenstraat. Albert was destined, however, to become primarily an arranger of organ books rather than an organ builder. The era in which he grew up was, of course, not the easiest of ones, with activities at the firm very much affected by the wartime period. Fortunately, the Decap firm was able to regain its strength quickly in the post war period and with this came the ever present need to provide the organs with good arrangements of the latest hit tunes. So, at the age of 15, Albert began experimenting with making organ books.

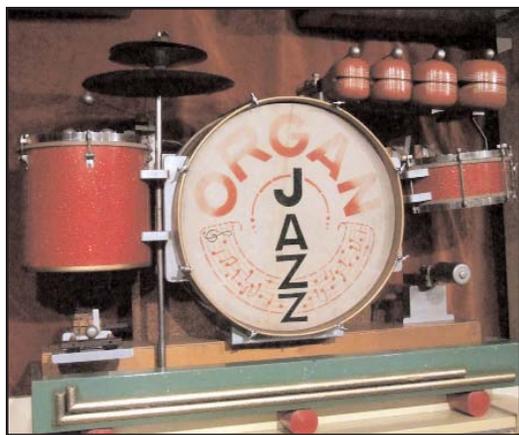


Figure 1. “Organ Jazz” the Gebroeders Decap trademark of a decade or so from the late forties and one that became synonymous with the music of Albert.

Little is known about exactly what happened next, but the proliferation of his music dating from this time onward really speaks for itself. His name became synonymous with the “Organ Jazz” logo that was embla-

zoned on every Decap organ of the period, and organ jazz it certainly was! **Figure 1.**

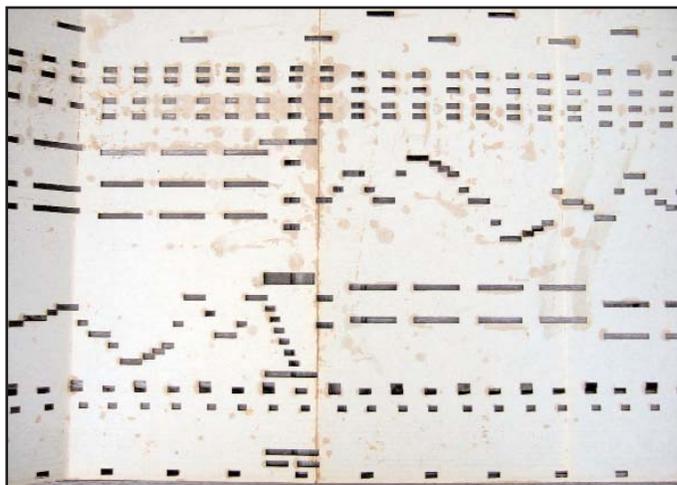


Figure 2. Part of an improvisation foxtrot arranged by Albert Decap for the 92-key Decap scale. Two players in a jazz band are represented exchanging the melody line between them as the accompanying bass player and percussionist provide a framework for the music. Reading from right to left, the first page of the book features a jazz solo on the registers violin, jazz flute and trumpet, set against soft background chords on the Vox Celeste. At the fold in the book the registers are re-set. The jazz solo is now played on the counter-melody registers: vibratone, saxophone and cello grave/bassoon, bathed in soft chords on the melody Vibratone. The bass and accompaniment note patterns, towards the top of the book are kept in strict tempo, as is the percussion towards the lower edge. Despite its apparent simplicity, the music is wholly absorbing to listen to and perfectly balanced.

What made his music so special? Words cannot really begin to describe this, but it has been said that his music “even made the tables and chairs dance.” As an arranger for dance organs he was always working in strict tempo, but be the music a foxtrot, a rumba, a waltz or whatever, the arrangements were crisp and melodic and, in my opinion, very modern for their day. To pick but two rhythms in which he excelled, a simple foxtrot could provide a framework in which, just like an artist in a live jazz band, he could improvise to his heart’s content. My first encounter with his style was in books such as *As I Hear a Trumpet* or *Play a Simple Melody on Jeanneke*, the 92-key Decap organ at Charles Hart’s Collection in St. Albans (now St Albans Organ Theatre). In these pieces you will hear the music really take off with a trumpet lead solo set against soft chords on the counter-melody. And then Albert would switch players so to speak, with a saxophone lead melody played on the counter melody section of the organ, while the melody section of the organ took a

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back seat. All this was within a backdrop of percussion that was used, just as a jazz band would use it, to play with the flow of the tune and not just for novelty effect. To me, this music is the real essence of Albert. **Figure 2**

The *Musette Waltz* (“Accordion Waltz”) was another great specialty. As an accordionist himself, Albert was well aware of this genre of music. Indeed, he not only arranged but also composed some pieces of music in this category such as *Caroline*, *Pirouette* and *Constance* which, I believe, he named in honor of his wife, Constance Hertoghs. These waltzes are real works of art and their symmetry is fascinating to watch as the music threads through the key frame of an organ.

The organs for which Albert arranged came from many manufacturers, but his arrangements were perhaps always heard at their best on the products of the Decap factory itself, especially the dance organs of 72, 92, 105 and 121-key sizes. In the era in which Albert was becoming more accomplished as an arranger developments in organ design were, ironically, to pose some new challenges for the arranger as the production of all pipe organs (such as *Jeanneke*) was phased out in favor of the new semi-electronic “Univox” organs. The primitive electronic sound generation systems in these organs (which were supplemented by bass and accompaniment pipes) could not play chords, only single notes, albeit within a very wide musical range. To get good results using this scale required great skill, but Albert successfully achieved variety in his music, jumping up and down between octaves, despite the need to work within these technical limitations.



Figure 3. The LP that started it all, “A. Decap Sound, Volume 1.” This was the first of countless LPs of Albert’s music featuring the latest 105-key semi-electronic organ incorporating a Hammond Organ. The LPs form a partial library of Albert’s music of the period. The sleeve credits are very useful in attributing correct titles and composers to individual pieces found on unlabelled books on other organs.

It was the advent of the next generation of Decap organs incorporating Hammond organs, plus some melody and counter melody pipework that really brought Albert great popularity with a wider audience and his name to the fore. Starting with the LP “A. Decap Sound, Volume 1,” countless volumes of LPs were produced featuring his music on the latest 105-key Hammond-based organs. **Figure 3.** It is hard to imagine how great this phenomenon was; with every “café dancing” (as the new generation of giant roadside cafes were known) wanting to have the latest organ installed playing Albert’s most recent music. LPs

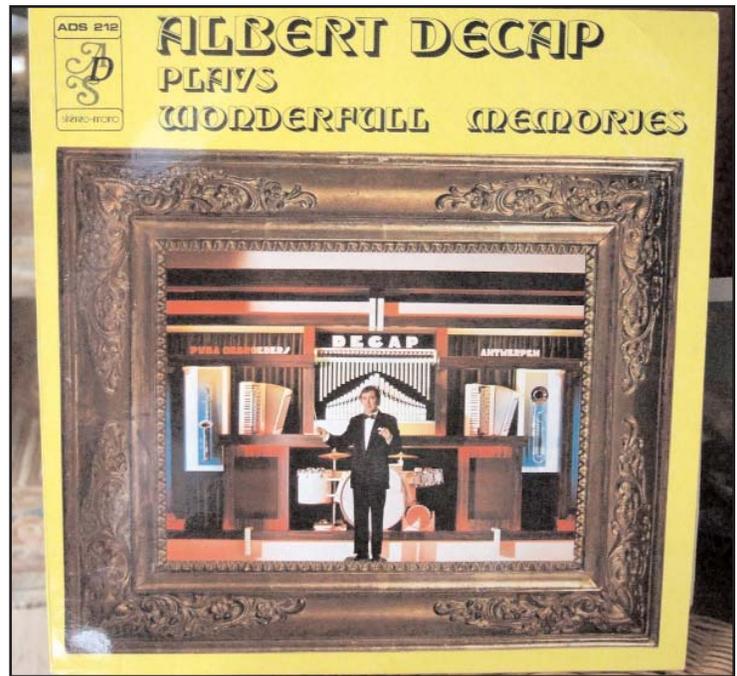


Figure 4. The only one of the “A. Decap Sound” LPs that shows Albert on the cover. His appearance as a conductor reflects the unusual selection of classical music that is featured on this LP

of the music were for sale in the cafes themselves and High Street record shops.

Despite the fame of his music, the organs and the “A. Decap Sound” LPs, Albert himself was an extremely quiet and modest man who shunned the limelight, the only known exception to this being his appearance on the front cover of the LP “Albert Decap Plays Wonderful Memories” which features Albert dressed as an orchestra conductor in front of a 105-key organ. **Figure 4.** Indeed, when I first met Albert, some years ago I found it a little hard to believe that such an unassuming individual was the person behind the production of such fantastic music. Yet to Albert it was his whole life and second nature to him. When visiting him and his family, there was very little discussion of organs or their music as there was nothing that needed to be discussed. It was a way of life, rather than a hobby and instead we would talk about the huge family of cats that roamed the house, places we had traveled to on our holidays, or whatever.

When I first met Albert it was a real family business as Constance would manually punch the books that Albert had arranged. **Figure 5.** Very sadly, Albert was widowed shortly afterwards, but he continued to both mark and cut books entirely on his own for some years until his health finally brought his retirement in his mid seventies. Albert always marked out music manually; he had no need to hear the music played back on a computer before punching it, as he could hear it perfectly in his own mind, whatever the instrument concerned.



Figure 5. Albert's late wife, Constance, punching out a book marked by Albert. In recent times Albert undertook this work himself.

Albert was also active in the world of organ building with the production of some 105-key semi-electronic organs incorporating electronic units produced by Pernet and Eminent, but he was first and foremost an arranger who had huge creativity using the simplest of tools. He was at his happiest doing this day in and day out.

As in the case of almost all of my favorite arrangers, I first met Albert through his music. He was, in fact, probably the very first arranger whose style I came to know and recognize, although at that time I had no idea who had arranged the pieces in question. My ignorance was probably understandable because at the time, as a young visitor to Charles Hart's organ collection, much of the cardboard music I encountered carried no label on the cover. "Continental music" was played less than more recent English titles commissioned principally from Arthur Prinsen and Eugene Peersman. Nevertheless, in the early days of the Museum an excellent mono LP was issued, "The Sound of *Jeanneke* Mortier Band Organ" which featured some of his best music, including the previously mentioned *As I Hear a Trumpet*. It is a reflection of the era in which the LP was issued that *Jeanneke* is wrongly described on the cover as a Mortier organ (Mortier being thought of at the time as more prestigious than Decap I suspect) and that no mention of Albert's name appears anywhere on the sleeve. However, the arrangements and the organ to which they were so skillfully tailored, spoke for themselves and, to this day, it amazes me that I am not alone in playing this old mono recording with all its hisses and crackles far more than many recently produced and cleanly recorded CDs.

Albert was a great arranger and friend who will be very much missed. **Figure 6.** Like all arrangers, however, his spirit will live on through the very fine repertoire of music he has left us.

His funeral took place on 22 May 2009 at the church of H.Martinus at Halle Dorp. Our thoughts are with his family, Leo and Freya.

How I met Albert Decap

My contact with Albert began some years ago when I acquired a 72-key Gebr. Decap organ. Although the organ came with around 90 minutes of music, mainly by Albert and dating from the period up to the 1970s, I was keen to expand its repertoire. To get this new music, who better to go to than someone who had clearly mastered the art of getting the very best out of its somewhat limited musical scale?

How to get in touch with Albert was the first problem. Although many in Belgium and the Netherlands were clearly successful in obtaining music from him, nobody else in Britain appeared to be placing any orders. In the pre-internet age, the best option seemed to be to write a letter to the address shown on his music book label, so I duly did that.

After a while, back came a reply. Yes, Albert could make books if I could supply the necessary details of the organ. As a new customer, I felt that it would be best if I visited Albert prior to giving the go-ahead and so plans were made for a visit to his home in Halle-Zoersel in Belgium.

Looking at the map, Halle-Zoersel appeared to be a small village to the north of Antwerp. Mrs Decap had kindly arranged to pick me up from the city centre, so all looked set for a problem-free visit. To be quite sure of being at the agreed pick up point at the right time, I was to stay in Antwerp at a hotel, close to the railway station, the night before. And so it was that I arrived in Antwerp at around nine o'clock at night on what must have been the hottest day of the year. Upon entering the non-air conditioned hotel room I was hit by a wall of heat which made habitation, let alone sleep, impossible. I went to the nearby Café Beveren while leaving the bedroom window open to dissipate the intense heat!

I should explain that the star attraction at the Café Beveren is a 92-key Decap pipe organ that plays when a coin is inserted into a wallbox. The music I heard at the Café Beveren was, needless to say, very much the work of Albert Decap.

Arriving back in the room at around one o'clock in the morning, still in sweltering heat, I shut the window and put my head down in an attempt to get a few hours sleep. No good! It was just too hot; I had to turn the light on and open the window. Turning off the light again, I was about to become the victim of an attack....

A buzzing sound in my ear revealed the presence of the enemy; a swarm of hungry mosquitoes! Try as I might, I could not escape them. I cocooned myself under a sheet, but the heat was unbearable, they had to be eradicated with the only weapon at my disposal; the telephone book-like Belgian Railways Timetable!

Swatting each and every mosquito was an exhausting and noisy task, the ceiling of the room being so high that I

had to launch the book skywards to hit its target. The walls of the room became blood stained with the crushed creatures as I sweated out all my energy trying to rid the room of the infestation. Goodness knows what the other guests thought.....

When morning came I had been thoroughly bitten all over, from head to toe. I tried to resist the intense desire to scratch every tingling bite as I awaited the arrival of Mrs Decap at the agreed pick up point. I need not have worried about the pick up arrangements as everything worked perfectly and soon we arrived at ...the Decap "cattery."

I had long known that Albert was famous as a great music arranger, but I didn't know that Constance was a champion cat breeder. It came as no surprise to find the house inhabited not just by the Decap family, but also by a multitude of cats who climbed and sat on every seat and sofa, regardless of whether occupied by a visitor or not. Not to worry, I don't mind cats. Sadly, one of cats was not so keen on me, as I found out when it showered me while strutting across my lap!

"I'm afraid one of your cats has had a bit of an accident," I said. Constance came running to the rescue, insisting that she washed and dried my somewhat damp shirt. Removing my shirt, I could only imagine what my mosquito bitten torso looked like to her!

I was covered in big red bites.

It was clearly not going to be a quick visit with all the washing and drying that needed to be done but, what better chance to get to know the family....

Once this little episode was over, and after a cool refreshing drink, there was, of course, the subject of my music order to be discussed. Constance, who spoke English well, introduced Albert to me, explaining that he spoke very little English. I explained, via Constance, that I wanted to obtain some music for my 72-key Gebr. Decap organ and, as confirmation of the specifications of the organ, handed over a copy of the scale for examination. Albert looked extremely puzzled. Was something wrong I wondered? The answer was no, but extraordinarily, Albert had

made no music for the 72-key organs for so long (the scale being fairly uncommon) that it was not immediately familiar to him. All was okay however; Albert could make the books, plus one specially requested tune for my Mortier.

While the washing dried, we chatted about many things, organs more or less exempted as they were just a part of everyday life and needed no further discussion. Regarding organs, the heyday was seen to have gone; the local cafes with organs were in a slow decline and what demand for organ books existed came almost solely from collectors. It was enough to keep Albert busy arranging however, and Constance too as her part in the business was to punch books. Also involved in the business was their son, Leo and his partner Freya, with whom I found I shared an interest in travel. A tour of the house was also on the agenda. Music was marked and the books punched upstairs in an airy room adjacent to the kitchen and living areas. A utility area downstairs housed a large book making machine, as Albert purchased raw card on a roll and made up his own blank books. All in all, it represented the entire book production process that had been conducted for many decades.



Figure 6. Albert at work. He used traditional music marking methods throughout his career and no reason to adopt computer-based technologies in music production.

Some months later I returned to the house to collect the music. This was something that I was to do on many occasions over the following years and was always a cause of great amusement as, being a user of public transport, I would take the music away in a gigantic rucksack. Carrying around 150 metres of folded cardboard music at a time on my back was not unusual!

In this way I was able to assemble over the years what I consider to be a very fine cross-section of Albert's work in a scale for which music is not so common.

Playing this music and other arrangements by Albert, gives me very much pleasure and always brings a smile to the face of visitors to my organ collection, be they those well versed in mechanical music, or those who have

never encountered a mechanical organ before. Undoubtedly, Albert's music is a universal language that will continue to have an appeal to all for many years to come.

Peter Craig has been fascinated by mechanical music from the age of five, his interest being sparked by through visiting the former collection of Charles Hart in St Albans, England in the late 1960s. He has travelled Europe extensively in search of organs and leads organized tours for the Mechanical Organ Owners' Society, of which he is a committee member and former chairman. In recent years he has assembled a small collection of organs by Mortier, Decap and Verbeeck, for which he continues to assemble a repertoire of music appropriate to the style of each instrument.