

Arthur Prinsen—a Life full of Music

Daniel DeBie & Björn Isebaert

For many years, the organ world in Belgium and far abroad was “marked” by Arthur Prinsen (born 1933). But who is he? In a personal interview, he confided us the story of his life and activities; the following article is the result of this interview.

Music in the Blood

It’s obvious that Arthur has had music in his blood from his very early years. Already at the age of nine, Arthur developed an interest in music, albeit rather by coincidence: his mother ran a shop, but due to a serious illness, she could not continue to do this. Arthur’s father couldn’t either, because he was employed in a tobacco company. Therefore, a couple they were well acquainted with took over this task. The husband of this couple had a small, diatonic accordion, and after school Arthur often tried to play on this instrument. Arthur’s father had noticed his son’s talent, and he bought him a similar instrument. His father, however, insisted that Arthur would take proper music lessons—in those days, only private teachers gave accordion lessons, since official music schools classified the instrument as “street music.” This teacher stimulated Arthur to acquire a larger instrument, which he did. It should be noted that in those war years, the accordions weren’t of the best quality, amongst other things because the Germans needed all the brass available: the corners of an accordion’s bellows are normally reinforced with brass, so these regularly tore.

Arthur diligently continued his music studies, and also followed lessons in musical notation at the music academy. Meanwhile, the named private teacher had started an accordion band (in order to avoid that the younger members of the band would be set to work by the occupying forces), which also toured regularly in Germany; however, Arthur couldn’t participate in those tours, because he was still too young.

The band’s appearances became real concerts, and every weekend, they performed a show in a dance hall in Hoboken; after the band’s performance, there always was a show by a dance band, and somehow, Arthur got to play in this band, because of his excellent musical feeling, allowing him to play many modern tunes by ear. *Tuurke*—as he was soon nicknamed—was offered a permanent position in the dance band; an offer he readily accepted. Through the leader of the band, Arthur started

practicing the trumpet and also started to play in a brass band. However, due to a serious accident, he couldn’t play the trumpet any longer, so he chose the saxophone (**Figure 1**) and also started playing the Hammond organ.



Figure 1. Arthur Prinsen at the age of 18 with his saxophone.
Photo courtesy: Arthur Prinsen.

In the following years, Arthur played in dozens of combos and dance bands; one of those was the band of Toto de Wandel, which weekly accompanied various artists during live performances on the Belgian radio (then called N.I.R.).

Arthur, the arranger

As a member of a dance band, Arthur regularly performed in dance halls where, in those days, a dance organ could be found and was normally played before or after the show. Arthur often went to look behind the organ, fascinated by the mechanism. Arthur was playing



Figure 2. Arthur as vocalist in “The Vocals,” accompanied by a big band. With this group, Arthur did many shows in Belgium and the Netherlands. The group also made some LP recordings and performed in TV shows. Photo courtesy: Arthur Prinsen.

for Willy Rockin’ (the stage name of Achiel van Wichelen) and he told Arthur that his father, a well-known arranger Urbain van Wichelen, arranged book music for these instruments. Soon Arthur paid a visit to Urbain in Boechout. Urbain then (ca.1956) already had plans to stop arranging and was looking for a successor (apparently, he didn’t think his son was a suitable candidate). In the meantime, Arthur had married Paula and had become manager in a garage, but remained intrigued by what he had seen in Urbain’s workshop, and the idea to start arranging himself kept going through his mind. This would also have the advantage that he could give up his nightlife as a musician (although he would always remain a musician in heart and soul **Figure 2**). Arthur returned to Urbain and made clear he was serious. Initially, Urbain reacted somewhat skeptical, but Arthur persevered. Using scale sticks, Arthur studied existing organ books to gain more insight into the art of arranging; regularly—and with great patience—he asked Urbain’s advice. After many days had passed, Arthur finally got the chance to make an arrangement of his own. He arranged *Tulips from Amsterdam* for an organ in a small café in Boechout. The organ did play, but there was obviously still room for improvement. Arthur didn’t give up and continued to scrutinize scales and organ books.

Arthur, with his wife Paula (who was running a shop then) lived in one of two semi-detached houses, with the other one being occupied by Urbain. On a night in 1958, Urbain had a heart attack, and decided to give up arranging permanently. Arthur then collected all his savings in

order to take over Urbain’s business, including all materials (arranging barrels, stencils, punching machines, list of clients, etc.). However, Arthur also needed to find another place to live, since Urbain’s house was going to be sold. Coincidentally, Arthur’s parents-in-law were going to construct two semi-detached houses in Brasschaat. Arthur and Paula decided to build on a work-place, and moved there in 1961.

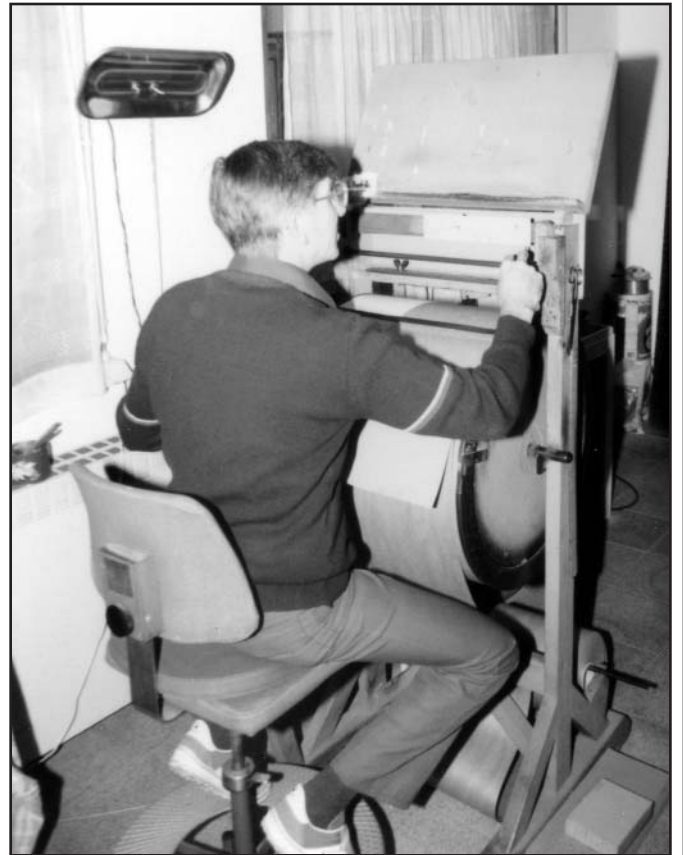


Figure 3. Arthur at his arranging barrel.

Photo: Dan Slack archives.

Initially, Arthur only arranged for customers in Belgium and the Netherlands (**Figure 3**) (mostly in Zeeland, like the well-known café-owner Monjé in Breskens). One day there was an Englishman standing on his doorstep. This was David Barlow, the then owner of the famous Mortier organ *De Kluisberg*. It shouldn’t surprise us that in those days organ owners found their way to Belgium for organ books, as only a handful of arrangers were still active then, the great majority of them being located in Belgium and the Netherlands! Arthur soon gained a good reputation, and other English customers (also owners of fair organs) started to order from him. Meanwhile, the American collector, Paul

Eakins, also had become one of Arthur's clients, so his arrangements found their way to owners in the USA too.

Also, large record companies like Fonior, Decca and Phonogram knew where to find Arthur, since every year they wanted to release a record with the hits of the moment played on a dance organ. Likewise, many LPs with Arthur's arrangements were issued in England and the USA (e.g. by Disneyland in Los Angeles). Arthur even arranged some tunes for the movies: "Half A Six Pence" (1967) and "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" (1968).



Figure 4. Arthur making cardboard organ books.
Photo: Dan Slack archives.

The business in Brasschaat became very successful. At a given moment, it employed no less than four women punching music books. Family members also regularly assisted in the workshop. This was really necessary, as Arthur also made the cardboard organ books himself. The cardboard was delivered in large rolls and then had to be cut, folded and glued into a book by hand on special machinery (**Figure 4**).

The client list of Urbain van Wichelen also contained some owners of roll-operated Arburo orchestrions, and Arthur had to manufacture complete rolls, including the spools. These rolls were normally arranged on Sundays and then 12 of them were punched at once on a special punch—a job that was done with great care by Paula. After some time, the production of these rolls decreased, because the number of roll-operated orchestrions in Belgium gradually became smaller and smaller. When many of these instruments found their way to the USA and England (partly because of the acquisition of the "Bursens hoard" by Q. David

Bowers), the market for these rolls became even smaller, since the individual taste of these new customers prohibited mass production of one and the same roll. Since the production costs of the rolls could no longer be justified, Arthur decided to stop arranging and manufacturing them.



Figure 5. Arthur's wife, Paula, at the punching machine.
Photo: Dan Slack archives.

Special mention is deserved by Arthur's wife Paula (**Figure 5**): for more than 50 years she has almost daily been punching—with a never-ending patience and diligence—Arthur's arrangements. Literally hundreds of miles of cardboard have gone through her hands. Those readers who have ever punched an organ book themselves, surely know that this is monumental achievement! **Figure 6**.



Figure 6. Detail of Arthur's unique punching machine: the head and matrix have been constructed in such a way that any size of die can be chosen with a simple click on one of the levers.

Photo: Dan Slack archives.



Figure 7. Arthur Prinsen, Arthur Bursens and Jef Ghysels standing next to a 68-key Bursens organ.

Photo: Ron Bopp.

Arthur, the Organ Builder

When Arthur moved from Boechout to Brasschaat, he owned a small, non-playing Mortier organ. He wanted to get it playing, and managed to, thanks to Arthur Bursens, who happened to be a great-uncle of Paula—**Figure 7**.

In those days, Arthur was one of the few people in Belgium who occupied himself daily with organs, which was why he often got telephone calls from organ owners who wanted to get rid of their instrument. It was important to react instantly because in the early and mid 1960's, organs often just stood in the way and many of them were even burned as worthless junk! From that time on, Arthur also repaired, restored and rebuilt organs.

Another important master of Arthur was Leon Decap, who didn't work for Gebr. Decap Antwerpen anymore because of the rise and popularity of electronic organs. Every day he travelled by bus to assist in Arthur's workshop.

In the 1960's, Arthur constructed his first organ using an old organ case as the basis. The pipes were made in Arthur Bursens's workshop, since Arthur didn't have the proper machinery at his disposal yet. Later on, his most popular creations were the 49-key street organs

and the smaller, hand turned 32-key organs (**Figure 8**). Construction of this latter type started in the early 1980s and about 85 of them were made. This number clearly indicates that Arthur had discovered a hole in the market and knew how to respond to it. One must not forget that hardly any portable book-operated organs of high quality were for sale in those days. In spite of their relatively small size these instruments are capable of playing a very varied repertoire because of the clever, nearly chromatic scale.



Figure 8. Arthur Prinsen and Jef Ghysels with one of the well-known 32-key hand-turned organs.

Photo: Ron Bopp.



Figure 9. Arthur's final work, a 84-key concert organ named *Primar*.

Photo: Bob Cantine.

As a finishing touch to his career, Arthur decided to build one last organ: the 84-key concert organ, *Primar* (Figure 9).

We certainly need to mention Arthur's cooperation with Jef Ghysels: They started working together in the early 1970s and continued to do so until today—the façade of *Primar* is a clear evidence of this.

Over the years, Arthur expanded his own organ collection. Part of it was located at Arthur's workshop in Brasschaat, another part at Jef Ghysels's place. Due to lack of space, Arthur and Paula decided to move to larger premises at Sint-Niklaas in 1980. The new location included a separate workshop to manufacture organ books and repair or restore organs. Behind the workshop, a large space was fitted out as a museum, which attracted many visitors. In the museum,

Arthur also placed a Compton theatre organ, which came from the UK (Figure 10). In 1987, he temporarily moved to the north of France, but he eventually returned to Brasschaat.

Conclusion

Arthur is an arranger and technician who always loved to work, but most of all, in his heart and soul, he was and still is a musician! Together with his wife Paula he has provided music for organs in the entire world; as an organ enthusiast, one can only show respect for this!

A big "thank you" to Arthur for his kind cooperation with helping with this article.

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Figure 10. Arthur at the console of his Compton theatre organ in his museum in Sint-Niklaas.

Photo courtesy Arthur Prinsen.

Daniel De Bie is the current editor of the Belgian mechanical music society. Björn Isebaert has been interested in mechanical music for two decades. He is a teacher in Latin and Greek in a secondary school, and lives with his wife, Marleen, and a whole bunch of animals in rural Zingen, near Gent, Belgium. He's the proud owner of a 36-key Verbeeck organ.