

Marie Jeanne A 92-key Decap Pipe Organ

Roger Mostmans and Andrew Pilmer

Decap Brothers Antwerp: A Short History Roger Mostmans © Roger Mostmans 2009

In 1902, Alois Decap started in business together with his second eldest son, Livien, in what were then modest premises at 22, Essenstraat in Antwerp, Belgium. In the 1920s, Livien and two of his four brothers, Léon and Camille, formed a joint partnership and began to trade under the official name of Gebroeders Decap™ (Decap Brothers). This company, which has continuously built new organs since that time without any breaks in production, would grow to be one of the largest and most successful of its kind in Belgium.

The Decap brothers formed a true family business in which the first and second generations, as well as the third and fourth, would also eventually work. In this way, Louis Mostmans, the son-in-law of Camille Decap, the youngest of the brothers, started work at the firm in 1944; he was a cabinet maker who would later specialise in making pipes, organ cases and façades. In 1972 his own son, Roger Mostmans (grandson of Camille Decap) came into the business. Since 1974 and the death of Camille Decap, his daughter, Martha, together with her husband Louis Mostmans and their son Roger, have directed the firm.

In 2009 Decap Brothers Antwerp is justifiably proud to still occupy the same address at which it has been located since 1902.

The Firm's Products

At first the firm limited its operations to the repair of its own organs; later brand new street organs were built for clients in the Netherlands. Gradually the product range became broader, so that over the years many orchestrons playing paper rolls or cardboard books were made, as well as fair organs, dance organs, electronic organs and combination pipe and

electronic organs. Organs featuring working robot musicians were a particular success during the 1960's.

In order to rationalize production, keyframe sizes and the instrumentation of the various types of organ offered became standardized. The brothers built full pipe organs with 72, 92 and 121 keys; electronic organs with 72, 92 and 105 keys; Robot organs with 92 and 105 keys and both 92 and 105-key combination (pipe and electronic) organs. This was further expanded after 1980 with computer-controlled organs and accordion-playing figures. In 1989, 52-key street organs were added to the range and in 1996 MIDI computer-control was also introduced.

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The “Modern Dance Organ” Andrew Pilmer

After 1945, a number of changes quickly took place in the appearance of dance and café organs after the long years of austerity during the war; there was a great surge in the building of new taverns in small villages and towns and it was mainly for this market that the surviving organ firms competed.

The new innovations were almost universally adopted by the various organ builders: one significant change was

in the way the piano accordions were mounted. Until that time, accordions had been accommodated in niches in the façades, but now they were completely on view so that the mysterious action of their keys and buttons could be fully appreciated. The accordion became a featured solo instrument in its own right.



Figure 1. *Marie Jeanne*, a 92-key Decap Dance Organ, as seen in the Edgerton collection.

As well as accordions, dummy saxophones were also featured whose valves operated by invisible means when the saxophone parts played in the music. The actual sound was produced by a rank of reed pipes which were often mounted in the façade, immediately behind the display instruments, to heighten the illusion.

All of the firms began to place the various percussion instruments on view as a central feature of the façade, whereas previously organ builders had hidden away the various drums and effects out of sight within the cabinets which contained the organ pipes.

92-key Gebr. Decap Pipe Organs

The first 92-key Gebroeders Decap pipe organs were built in the late 1930s and featured completely closed façades except for a niche containing a single accordion. The percussion in such instruments was enclosed out of sight in a removable cabinet attached to one end of the main organ case. There are at least two examples of this early type of 92 key organ presently in the United States, one in the collection of Dick Hack (**Figure 2**) and the other, recently restored, is in the Sanfilippo collection, and was previously an attraction at the famous Svoboda Nickelodeon Tavern (**Figure 3**). In these organs, the wind is produced by a traditional pump (bellows) feeding into a reservoir. In organs built after the war, the wind was furnished by a centrifugal blower due to the short supply of suitable leather.



Figure 2. Early style 92-key Decap dance organ in the collection of Dick and Cheryl Hack. Photo: Dick Hack.

Rik de Wolf, who designed the façades at Gebroeders Decap, came up with a house style in a version of art deco whose origin even today continues to be instantly recognisable due to the flowing lines and excellent proportions. The earliest façades of this style still incorporated carved panels, but these were not like the traditional carvings from before the war, being much more stylised and freer in their interpretation. Later, carvings were almost com-

pletely omitted. Curved surfaces, formed from plywood, often concealed indirect lighting. The varied colored circuits were linked to the pipe registers so that the lighting patterns automatically changed with the music—an early predecessor of present day disco lights. Finally, the new façades, were decorated in the nearby studio of August Souvenbrie, and, in contrast to earlier styles, highlighted by airbrush lining in contrasting colors.



Figure 3. Another early style 92-key Decap organ in the Sanfilippo collection.

Depending on the size and specification of the instrument, the whole effect gave the impression of a small dance band having all the familiar instruments, but without any visible musicians. These “modern dance organs” as they were known, were an immediate sensation and a great commercial success with both customers and the general public alike.

A final and significant influence on this new generation of modern dance organs, which should not go unmentioned, was that of Albert Decap, son of Léon, one of the original Decap brothers. Born in 1931, Albert grew up amongst the organs in the factory and became an accomplished musician at an early age which led him to take a particular interest in the arranging of music for the organs. By the 1950s he had perfected a unique new style of music marking which combined the technical possibilities of the new organs with the top hits of the time, creating his own special rhythmic trademark which was unmistakably reflected in the firm’s logo which, for maximum exposure, was always painted on the bass drum skin: *Organ Jazz* (**Figure 4**).

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Figure 4. The well-known bass drum Decap logo, *Organ Jazz*.

The 92-key organs became very popular and a considerable number were built. Some, intended for smaller venues, had one accordion and dummy saxophone; others, destined for larger establishments had two of each.

The *Marie Jeanne*

The *Marie Jeanne* (Figure 1 & Centerfold) was built around 1952 and was named after the daughter of the original owner, Jean Staelens, who operated the Dierentuin, a large tavern and zoological garden at Lokeren in Belgium. It is a typical example of a higher specification 92-key Gebr. Decap organ with two accordions and two saxophones. Staelens was a lover of organ music and owned several instruments at various times.



Figure 5. *Marie Jeanne* 92-key Decap dance organ as seen in a private Dutch collection in 1995.

After commercial use the organ was sold in 1970 to Mr Hart of The St. Albans Organ Museum, England, by the well-known Belgian organ dealers Oscar and Leonard Grymonprez; two years later it became part of the collection of Frank Bond, a relation of Mr Hart's, where it kept company with a number of other Decap and Mortier organs. On Mr. Bond's passing some years later, the collection was dispersed by auction in 1983 and *Marie Jeanne* was bought by another English enthusiast, Flan Spiller. Later the organ was sold to the Netherlands where it had a number of different owners before eventually being brought back to England (Figure 5). Whilst in the Netherlands the organ even spent some time in a small café where it provided music for the entertainment of the patrons. Before shipping to the United States a considerable amount of work was carried out by A C Pilmer Automatic Music Ltd. including re-leathering of the action.

The 92-key Gebroeders Decap pipe organ scale is fully chromatic. The specification of *Marie Jeanne* is as follows:

Bass, 12 notes C - B: 1 x stopped, 1 x cello sounding the octave.

Accompaniment, 12 notes a - g#: 1 x stopped, 1 x cello sounding in unison.

Counter-melody, 16 notes f - g#: automatic registers for: cello grave (metal, one rank); cello (one rank); saxophone (located in the facade, 8 notes behind each of the dummy saxophones; vibratone alto; celeste (2 pipes per note) and vibratone.

The melody division has 22 notes a - f#: automatic registers for: vibratone, trumpet, jazz flute (fully stopped) and violin. The violin register is composed of two ranks, one sounding an octave higher than the other. All the pipework (270) is of wood unless otherwise stated. The jazz tremulant affects the melody jazz flute, vibratone and counter-melody vibratone ranks. The alto vibratone does not tremulate. The two accordions are connected to all of the 62 playing notes and are controlled by one register key. The percussion consists of: bass drum, snare drum (2 sticks), tom-tom (2 sticks) hi-hat cymbal, crash cymbal, four temple blocks, maraca and clave. The lighting changes are linked to the accordion and saxophone registers.

The *Marie Jeanne* has a sound typical of the post-war 92-key Decap organ: the pipes nominally sound their written pitch and do not transpose upwards, giving the instrument a full, warm sound which suits the more intimate surroundings of a smaller building.

The vibratone ranks, which have been compared with the familiar kazoo musical toy, are particularly well represented in all of the later products of Gebroeders Decap, and this organ is no exception. A very common effect is for the actual tune to be played by the jazz flute and vibratone with the tremulant selected on the melody division, with suitable chords played on the counter-melody vibratone, also with the tremulant, to fill out the overall sound producing a kind of “vibratone chorus”



Figure 6. The 92-key Decap in the Kraus Collection in Medina, Ohio.

Albert Decap became a master at utilizing the many resources of such organs. A particular speciality was his jazz improvisations which were often played in single-notes on the violin, trumpet and jazz flute registers drawn together (without the tremulant), against transparent three-note counter-melody chords on the celeste. Some bars later, this combination was often reversed, whereby the improvisation was now forcefully played in the counter-melody division on the saxophone, alto vibratone and cello, against chords in the melody played by the vibratone, this time with the tremulant.

Owner's Comments

When the spouse, partner, or significant other of a mechanical music collector hears an instrument and says “I’d like one of those,” I’ve learned that collector ought to pay attention.

So, Ann and I were in Europe with the Bumbling Bruder tour in 2005. We saw and heard several 92-key DeCap organs, but when we got to Fredy Kuenzle’s museum in Lichtensteig, Switzerland, she said those magic words. She particularly liked the two saxophones and two accordions featured on some of the 92-key models rather than the fewer number of instruments usually featured on smaller-sized organs.

Returning home and doing some research, I found that the only 92-key DeCap available in the US in the last few years had been snapped up by Ed Kraus, an Ohio collector (Figure 6). Thus I turned to Andrew Pilmer in York, England, who had been responsible for the fantastic restoration of our 89-key Gavioli.

Pilmer located an organ in Holland, shipped it to his shop in York for refurbishing, and then shipped it to us when a new house we were building in Connecticut was finished. We played it for all collectors who took the bus tours to collections during the recent MBSI annual convention.

I’m now worried about the cost of the next “one of those” that Ann might want!

Bill Edgerton

In some organs the trumpet is equipped with zinc resonators but in the case of *Marie Jeanne*, they are of made of wood.

The organ was crated and shipped to Connecticut in a dedicated 20’ container and was brought into Bill and Ann Edgerton’s new home shortly after arrival. After some weeks of acclimatization, we checked over and tuned the organ before final assembly prior to this year’s MBSI annual convention at Morristown, NJ. Bill and Ann hosted a house visit on one of the member’s collection bus tours when, spread over two days, around 300 people saw and heard the new acquisition.

Centerfold photograph by Keith Pritchett. All others by Ron Bopp unless otherwise noted.

Roger Mostmans is the grandson of Camille Decap and has worked full time in the Decap family business in Antwerp since 1974.

Andrew Pilmer has been involved with mechanical organs since 1986 and is well known among COAA members for his restorations as well as his hospitality with visits from the Bumbling Bruder Tour group.

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We now have a room full of organs and musical instruments. These include a 92-key Decap; a Hanchett calliope; a 123 Mortier with a new façade (built as a copy of the famous Taj Mahal organ); a 36-key Verbeeck street organ and a 165 Dyer-built band organ. The last is mounted in a trailer that we take to rallies.

Our music building has brought us many hours of pleasure entertaining groups of visitors over the years. We welcome visitors to come share a love for the fantastic music of old.