

## Deafening Protest (Street Organs in Haarlem)

Cornelis Ruijgvoorn

As you may know, the Haarlem mechanical organ museum has to contend with housing problems. These were created by the municipality. The town council decided to sell the building to a neighboring supermarket chain. At the same moment, they gave the new owners permission to demolish the building.

The Stichting Stadsorgel Haarlem “Het Kunkels Orgel,” trustee of the museum, is in consultation with the town council about this matter. In the autumn of 2001, we suddenly were confronted with demolition work on most of the neighboring buildings. When at the same time we received notice to leave the building before the 1st of June 2002 we decided it was time to speak up more loudly.

Our lawyer started a procedure on our behalf in court. This seemed to be the only way to fight the notice and threatening evacuation of our building. At the same time, we tried to get publicity. This resulted in broadcasts on local radio and television and some articles in local newspapers.

To get even more (and nationwide) publicity, we decided to organize some kind of protest demonstration during which a petition could be handed over to the town council.

In October, we started to collect signatures under a petition, which said:

Yes, I support the Stichting Stadsorgel Haarlem “Het Kunkels Orgel” (with her strive after salvation) of the mechanical organ museum which is unique for Haarlem and its wide surroundings. This museum and its collection may never disappear. I appeal to the town of Haarlem to grant the Foundation all assistance possible to make sure the foundation can continue her work (in a in every respect suitable location).

We did not start the actual organization of the protest demonstration at once. First, we had to think of the form it had to assume. Meanwhile Kees van der Linden, journalist of the *Haarlems Dagblad* (our local daily newspaper) wrote in the head of one of his articles about our problems that we had plans for a “deafening protest demonstration.” On that moment, we were still thinking that it might be just possible to get maybe ten organs together with which we could make ourselves heard on the Grote Markt (the market square in front of the town hall).

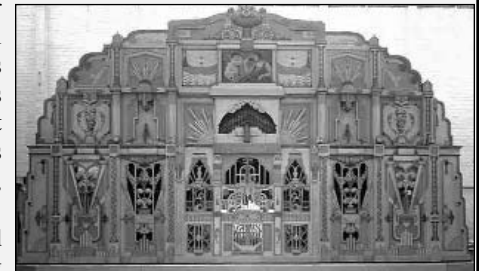
On the 28th of January, our case was heard in court. Some sixty friends from all over the country showed their support by following the proceedings from the public tribune in the courtroom. In doing so they immediately proved the opposite side wrong when they argued that our number of visitors almost never exceeded thirty people

After the lawsuit, we all went back to the organ museum to talk about what we witnessed and, of course, to guess our

### Street organ protest in Haarlem.

On the 5th of March, organ grinders will make a loud protest heard to prevent the closure of the Haarlem organ museum. For this procession, they will bring their organs from all points of the compass to Haarlem. In a long and close line of over 30 organs, they will accompany the board of the Kunkels Foundation from the Haarlem organ museum to the town hall. During the heart-warming sounds of organs, the Foundation's board want to deliver a petition (signed by over 1100 people) and letters and e-mails of support to the municipality.

The Stichting Stadsorgel Haarlem “Het Kunkels Orgel” (Kunkels Organ Foundation) is fighting for the salvation of their collection of unique mechanical organs, one of which is the Kunkels Organ (the one the foundation is named after). This majestic concert organ (the biggest in the country) is under threat to become homeless, together with the other nine organs. This is due to the uninterested and improper attitude and way of acting of the Haarlem municipality.



Kunkels Organ (112-key Marenghi)

Up until last year the municipality owned the museum building and the ground it is standing on. Then this property was sold for an unrealistic low price to a big supermarket company. The aim is to demolish all buildings in the Werfstraat and extend the existing shopping centre. The museum is in the way, on that spot a motor garage and showroom are planned. The new owners at once gave notice to the Foundation. We were to leave the building before the 1st of June 2002. Happily, a district judge ruled that this date should be postponed by one year.

The cold and moist climate in the museum, caused by demolition of the building behind us (the old interior partition wall suddenly has to act as outside wall), a broken down heating installation and leakages due to arrear maintenance of the roof, are conducive to the organs. Having no roof at all would be worse however!

A year passes by before you know it. This is why the Foundation tries to get the attention of the municipality. We want them to realize that our cultural heritage deserves a better treatment. They also need to realize that Haarlem is not just famous for their fine church organs; we want them to involve our collection in their big “Haarlem Organ City” scheme. After all, on weekdays your chance of finding and hearing a street organ is much better in Haarlem than in Amsterdam. Moreover, Haarlem houses an unique organ museum with, amongst others, the biggest mechanical concert organ of the country. Thus Haarlem can offer a special attraction to Dutch and foreign tourists who associate our country always with street organs. In short, Haarlem has the means at its disposal to be even more attractive to visitors.

A press release regarding Haarlem street organ protest.



Figure 1. A seldom seen sight today, the gathering of three organs on old-time wooden carts in front of the museum (*Harmonica, Kleine Radio and Brandweer*). Photo: Cornelis Ruijgvoorn

chances for a good outcome. Now the protest demonstration was also mentioned and discussed. Spontaneously, many of those present offered their cooperation. We ended up with a list of about twenty organs!

On the 11th of February, the district judge passed judgment in our case. He recognized the fact that the supermarket had a big interest in the demolition of our building but also that the securing of our collection was at least as important. He also recognized that we had given sufficient proof of our endless search for alternative buildings and that the town council had been less than helpful in this quest. In short: he decided we could stay in our building for one more year until the 1st of June 2003. At least this delay bought us some extra time. We will do all we can to find another building within the next year. Now it was also time to really start on our planned protest demonstration.

To make sure the town council would cooperate (for a protest demonstration against the town council this same town council has to give permission first), we decided to give the event a playful and cultural appearance. We decided to try to make a deafening protest by organizing a procession of as many simultaneously playing organs as possible. This procession might be eligible to be mentioned in the *Guinness Book of Records*. The number of promises gave us confidence that this should be possible.

We applied for permission for Tuesday the 5th of March (the day before elections for a new town council were to be held) and at once started to make arrangements with the organ owners and operators. Of course, with reserve, that permission was granted. At the end only the Friday before the planned day we received a message confirming that permission was granted (the actual license we even received a day after the event). This gave us just enough time to get the message through to all the participants. Sadly, there was no time left to inform the Foundations donators, the KDV members and other interested people by mail. We had therefore to rely on the Internet and mouth-to-mouth advertisements. Happily, the news reached a substantial number of people.

The actual day, March 5th, became a day one will never forget. From early in the morning on it was the best spring weather

one could hope for. Around nine o'clock, the museum staff were busy making coffee and rolls, from half-past nine the organs started to arrive. At about the same time the press started to come in.

Imagine the sight: three organs on old-fashioned wooden three-wheelers in front of the museum (**Figure 1**). And then all parking spaces opposite the museum occupied by street organs, completely with their tops up (**Figure 2**)! Soon the wide surroundings of the museum were filled with organ music. And between this all one saw television cameras from six broadcasting companies, radio reporters (we were live on radio!) and journalists and photographers of the writing press.

Each year, from April to September, on week nights we entertain foreign tourists who travel the country by boat. The captain of one of these boats, Ab de Korte, had offered his help for the action. He planned to bring together the procession and organize the general course of events. In doing so, he gave us a free hand for other things like interviews for radio, television and newspapers, taking care of the catering etc. After consulting us about the order in which we wanted the organs to take part to the procession, Ab made nice and well-visible big yellow cardboard stars with their name and number. Those were to be attached to the organs. Later he made sure they actually lined up in the Werfstraat in this order to start the procession in an orderly manner.

In the months before we had managed to get over 1100 signatures under our petition. In addition to that we received more than 100 letters of support (both by mail and by e-mail), many of which were from abroad. Together this made up a quite impressive book.



Figure 2. Unpacking and lining up in front of the museum.

Photo: Cornelis Ruijgvoorn

At one o'clock, the procession went under way (**Figure 3**). In front, two banners and representation of the Foundation's board marched, along with the big petition book. A line of organs that must have been at least half a kilometer long followed them. And playing of course, each organ with its own choice of music. We were escorted by two policemen on motorcycles at the head of the line, two others driving up and down the line to make sure no other traffic would try to come in between us; and a police car at the end. The Haarlem traffic, already troubled by delays because of the many road works and diversions, was not amused. At each crossing we were give a free path.



Figure 3. The procession underway, led by chairwoman Sylvia Goudriaan (with the big book full of signatures, letters and e-mails) and board member Johan Weima. Photo: JanKees de Ruijter

The journey to the market square took a little over half an hour, and once there, the organs were lined up in a half circle in front of the town hall (Figure 4). Still playing of course! It is unbelievable how much noise 40 (yes, that is right, FORTY) organs can produce together.

When I walked over the square between the organs, I really got tears in my eyes. Not just because of the music. And not just because of the amount of beautiful instruments together. But most of all, because all these organ people, on their own expenses, brought their organs (some from quite far away) to support our organ museum. At that moment, I realized how much our work in Haarlem on behalf of the museum is appreciated.



Figure 4. A view of the market square. Photo: Cornelis Ruijgvoorn

The petition, under great interest of the press, was presented by Sylvia Goudriaan and Johan Weima, to the municipality. Here Ab proved his value again. Two shouts with his loud captain's voice was enough to silence all organs within a few seconds.

Mayor Pop did the honors as Alderman Haverkort of cultural affairs failed to show up. The mayor was visibly impressed by the

number of attending organs—he had a beautiful view from which to view them from the town hall steps (Figure 5). In addition, the response on the petition was impressive. He could therefore do no else than promise that the town will do everything possible to help us find and move into a new museum building.

After these proceedings, the mayor was invited to take the wheel of the *Brandweer* and turn the book *Adios Noniño* (a piece of music that became famous since the royal wedding). We suspect that the mayor has turned an organ before (or he is a natural talent of course) because it went quite well. After this, only one signal by Ab was enough to get all organs playing again. The mayor was for some time besieged by the press and further made a round along each organ.



Figure 5. Sylvia Goudriaan, surrounded by television and radio crews, talks to Mayor Pop (balding gentleman in lower left of photo) with the organs on the square in front of them. Photo: Henk Vijn

At about half past two the action on the market square was concluded. In a neat file, the procession went under way again to the Werfstraat, all playing of course. Shortly after three, we arrived. A slowly diminishing group of people stayed to talk about the day while all the organs were covered and went underway to their respective (sometimes far) home towns. Around eight in the evening there were just the four of us left and we went out to enjoy a meal. During dinner nothing much was said, we were much too tired and impressed from the day that lay behind us.

On the moment that I write this, some weeks later, I again get a lump in my throat when I think of that day. The action did not immediately result in a new building (but we did not really count on that either). Nor do we know if all documentation that we forwarded to the *Guinness Book of Records* will be accepted as sufficient to be entered in that book. Fact is that, in a very impressive manner, we drew attention to the accommodation problems of our museum. In addition, it was a very good promotion for the mechanical organ in general. After all, the event took place in a very worthy, disciplined manner where really everything went as planned, and nothing went wrong.

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