

Oscar Grymonprez (1904 — 2008)

Tom Meijer

On 15 September 2008, Oscar Grymonprez died at the age of 103. He was the last person of a generation who had the chance of living in the “Golden Age” of the Belgian dance organ. For some time in the 1920s, he worked as an agent for the firm of Th.Mortier in Antwerp. In the 1950s and 1960s, he bought up, together with his son, Leonard, many old dance organs and orchestrions, which they repaired, rebuilt and then traded to the Netherlands, England and the USA.

Oscar Grymonprez was born in Gent on 18 November 1904. His son Leonard (born on 7 October 1932 and deceased 56 years later on his birthday, 7 October 1988) once wrote two articles in *Het Pierement* (HP), in which he related the history of his family (HP July 1960, pp.11-15 and HP October 1960, pp.5-6). In these articles we can read how Oscar found his way into the organ world.

Early Youth

The grandfather on Oscar Grymonprez’s mother’s side was named Henri de Keerschieter (the name in Leonard’s article is erroneously spelled ‘Heerschieter’). About the turn of the century he left, following a divorce, his birthplace, Heule (in West Flanders), together with his sister and his then 12-year old daughter Celina. They settled in Gent, the capital of the province East Flanders. There they started a popular café; they also kept some cattle. A short time after that, they were able to rent a larger café from its Dutch owner, called “In the city of Haarlem.”

One day a showman entered the café who had just ordered a brand new Marenghi organ and was looking for a storage place for his old Marenghi barrel organ. He offered to place it in Henri’s café free of charge. The organ was in bad condition and definitely needed some repairs. Henri, who didn’t know anything about organs, came into contact with an organ builder, Jan Cornand, who at the time was down and out. In exchange for accommodation, Jan repaired the instrument, which became an instant success in the café. Henri decided to buy the Marenghi and so the family became the owner of their first organ.

Jan Cornand taught Henri more about the organ trade and soon they were buying old organs from dance halls, which they repaired and resold. Gradually, they started their own small organ business, where they also pinned new barrels. After the sudden death of Jan Cornand, Henri decided to continue the organ trade himself.



Figure 1. A Photo from ca. 1960, on the left is Oscar Grymonprez; and the person on the right is unknown. The organ on the left is a 49-key Limonaire that was sold to Bill Barlow (now in the Cotton Museum in England). On the right is a 47-key Marenghi, fitted with a new middle façade made by Grymonprez from old Mortier carvings. This organ is now in the possession of Sjef van de Vrande.

In the meantime, his daughter Celina married Henri Grymonprez, who had other occupations and didn’t feel attracted to the organ business. In 1904, their son Oscar was born, and Grandfather Henri’s workplace was already filled with many organs. Whenever young Oscar came into the workplace, he watched, according to the article, the instruments full of admiration; then his grandfather said: “You see, they already have a hold on him!” When Oscar grew up, his grandfather bought music boxes and small organs for Oscar, who enjoyed disassembling them.

In 1911, Henri Grymonprez was killed in an accident with his horses; as a consequence, Celina remarried in 1914 to Gustaaf van Halter, who later took over the café and organ workshop of Grandfather Henri. Oscar gradually became involved in the business. When Henri died in 1919, his daughter and son-in-law inherited 32 organs and a large sum of money.

However, the relationship between Oscar and his stepfather was not good. At the age of 19, Oscar left the business and went to live with the family of his grandfather in the city of Kortrijk (we know of an organ on which the name P.H.Buyssens de Keersgieter has been painted). There were also many organs in Kortrijk, and soon Oscar established a reputation as an organ repairer. According to Leonard Grymonprez's articles he even received compliments for his work from Guillaume Bax, the foreman of the firm of Th.Mortier.

When his fame spread in Gent, Oscar's mother Celina asked him to return home. Oscar was persuaded and returned to Gent, where he continued the organ business together with his father-in-law. In 1927, Oscar married Irena De Wispelaere. From this marriage three children were born, amongst others, Leonard in 1932.

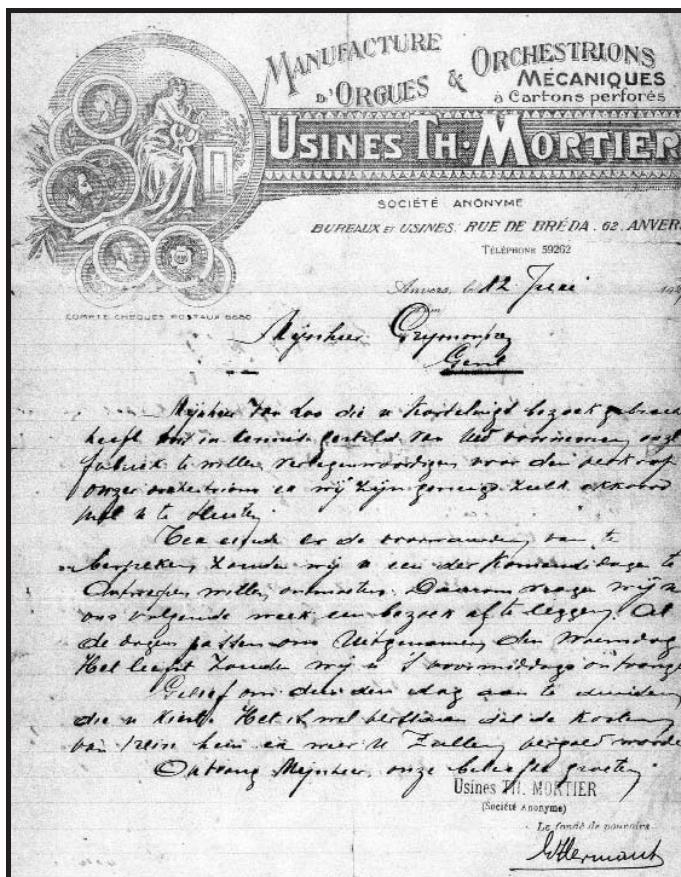


Figure 2. A letter from the Mortier firm to Oscar Grymonprez, dated on 12 June 1927. (From the archives of Maarten van der Vlugt)

Mortier

In a preserved letter from the firm of Th.Mortier to Oscar Grymonprez, dated on 12 June 1927 (**Figure 2**), we read the following information:

Mr.Grymonprez,

Mr.Van Loo, who recently visited you, has informed us about your intention to represent our factory for the sale of our orchestrions, and we are inclined to hire you as such.

In order to discuss the conditions of your employment, we would like to meet you in the next few days in Antwerp. Therefore, we request you to pay us a visit next week. We can receive you any day, except on Wednesday. If possible, we'd preferably receive you in the morning. So please let us know on which day you will come. Of course, we will refund the costs of the train (there and back). Kindly accept our regards.



Figure 3. The Peye 2, Drachten's city organ, delivered in 1958 by Oscar Grymonprez. Later, this Mortier became known as the *Twee Engelen* of Bonne de Jong,. Now the organ is owned by Harold L. Stebelton, Carroll Ohio, USA. (Photo from the archives of J.K. de Ruijter)

In the archives of the firm of Th.Mortier we can find information that the management was taking measures to stimulate the sales of dance organs and orchestrions. Assistant accountant Alfred van Loo organized a sales service to get in touch with new customers. Several salesmen were then assigned a Belgian region. The minutes contain their names, also the one of Oscar Grymonprez:

- L. Bécart, region at the West of Antwerp
- F. de Maeyer, region at the East of Antwerp
- J. Dionys, region of Antwerp
- A. Lonijs, region of Charleroi
- O. Grymonprez, region of Gent
- Ch. David, region of Luik
- F. Casteels, region of Mechelen

It is unknown if Oscar managed to sell many instruments, especially since after the economic crisis of 1929, the Mortier business was having hard times. It is probable that Oscar's employment was terminated in the early 1930s. According to Leonard's article, during this period his father was also employed by Pierre Verbeeck in Antwerp.

After The War

In the 1950s, the interest in old dance organs and orchestrions from the 1920s and 1930s seriously declined in Belgium. In the cafés, the modern organs by Decap and Bursens were more popular. Those who still had a dance organ with a nicely-carved façade in their premises were considered to be old-fashioned and attracted few customers. Oscar and his son Leonard bought up many of these instruments, which otherwise would very probably have been dismantled. Some of these organs were reduced in size and modernized for use in Belgian cafés.

At the end of the 1950s there also came some interest from the Netherlands. One of the first customers, according to the article, was the firm of G. Perlee from Amsterdam, which bought amongst others, a 101-key Mortier. Several dance organs were converted into street organs for the Dutch market. In this way, they delivered in the late 1950s to Herman Bonewit in Amsterdam the Vander Beken organ *De Twee Draken* and the Mortier organ *De Blauwe Wimpel* (Figure 4).

At the end of 1958, Drachten got its second official city organ, the *Peye 2*, which was also delivered by the Grymonprez firm. This sale is referred to in an advertisement in *Het Pierement* of January 1959. This Mortier organ later became known as *De Twee Engelen* of Bonne de Jong and is now located in the USA (Figure 3).



Figure 4. The Mortier organ *De Blauwe Wimpel* of Herman Bonewit, which was a spectacular appearance in the streets of Amsterdam in the late 1950s. This heavy organ used to be hand-turned.

Photo from the archives of Stichting "Het Kunkels Orgel".



Figure 5 (above) and 6 (below). Two then modern café-orchestrions, delivered by Oscar Grymonprez in 1961. The instrument above was owned by J. Sagt in Dussen (N.-Br.); the orchestrion below was located in the café of Mr. Cremers in Wilderen.

Information from *Het Pierement*, October 1961.



Furthermore, a number of organs were supplied to Rein van den Broek, including the *Arkel 1* and *Arkel 2*, the *Struisvogel* and an 80-key Mortier, later known as *The Golden Lion*. Another organ which came from Grymonprez was the one converted by Henk Gossling to the 90-key Carl Frei-scale, the *Milord*.

From 1959 to 1961, Grymonprez regularly advertised in *Het Pierement* with several instruments. In July 1959 they advertised on half a page ("Our offers in the 3rd quarter") also offering - apart from organs - organ figures and a punching machine. The advertisement ended with

the motto: “Grymonprez: a name rising in prestige in the Netherlands.”

In his article in October 1960, Leonard Grymonprez writes that at that moment, they had already traded about 160 organs, amongst which “certainly some hundred Mortier organs.” The number of traded organs would increase even more in the 1960s.



Figure 7. Originally an 84-key Mortier orchestrion rebuilt by the Grymonprez firm.

David Bowers

In the early 1960s father and son Grymonprez came into contact with potential clients in England and the USA. The well-known American author and collector, Q.David Bowers, was travelling Europe in those days, looking for rare coins, which was his primary occupation back then. In this way, he became acquainted with the world of mechanical musical instruments. It occurred to him that there was little interest in old dance organs and orchestrions. In England, however, the interest started to grow, thanks to the Musical Box Society of Great Britain and the Fair Organ Preservation Society, which already had hundreds of members.



Figure 8. An advertisement of the Grymonprez company in an issue of *Het Pierement*.

Bowers first met Eugène DeRoy, who still supplied rolls for orchestrions. He also had some instruments for sale. In the 1920s and 1930s, DeRoy had been an important manufacturer of orchestrion rolls and he had a database of more than 6,000 customers. This enabled Bowers to trace locations where instruments still could be found and to acquire many large orchestrions for collectors in the USA.

Soon Bowers received a letter from Leonard Grymonprez who spoke English quite well, which made the communication a lot easier. Bowers was the second American Leonard ever contacted (the first was Chappie Fox of the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin) and they clicked with each other immediately. Bowers first bought a Weber Maesto orchestrion from Grymonprez. Afterwards, father and son Grymonprez developed an intensive business relationship with Bowers, who was one of the persons behind the firm Hathaway & Bowers, Inc. from 1967 to 1972.

Eugène DeRoy as well as Oscar and Leonard Grymonprez provided a lot of historical material to Bowers, which he incorporated into his famous book *Encyclopedia of Automatic Musical Instruments*. On Bowers's advice, they also did business directly with several collectors in England and the USA.



Figure 9. From left to right: Leonard Grymonprez, Charles Hart and Oscar Grymonprez in front of a 101-key Mortier organ No.997.

St.Albans

Charles Hart owned a construction company (Goodwin and Hart) at 320 Camp Road in St. Albans (**Figures 9 & 10**). He also had a rental agency for 16mm movies and children's rides. From his early youth he was interested in mechanically playing organs. Because of his job, he visited fairgrounds quite often and there he noticed

in the 1960s that organs were slowly but surely disappearing and being replaced by sound equipment. He found that fair organs were too loud for his indoor collection, but he discovered a more “quiet” type of organ: the Belgian dance organ, of which many were still to be found on the European continent.



Figure 10. Charles Hart, Leonard and Oscar Grymonprez in front of the 92-key Gebr. Decap organ *Jeanneke*.

Charles Hart came into contact with Oscar and Leonard Grymonprez. In the 1960s and early 1970s, they often visited St.Albans and during those visits, they stayed with the Hart family. Over the years, they supplied well over forty organs and orchestrions, of which many were in a bad state. The largest organ was the 121-key Gebr. Decap Nethe renamed in England to *England's Pride*. Charles Hart resold many of these instruments to other English collectors. In a large tent near the Verulamium (a large park in St. Albans), he set up an exhibition hall. The appended overview gives an impression of the instru-

ments supplied by the Grymonprez firm to Charles Hart. In addition, they also supplied some smaller instruments like music boxes, player pianos, a Mills Violano and some orchestrions.

Other clients of Grymonprez included George Cushing, Sr. and Ted Hine. Another organ that came from Grymonprez to England, was the 84-key Mortier no. 925 *Mathilda*, owned for many years by L.J.Searle, Horsham, as can be seen on a photo of the instrument which shows the inscription “Restored by O.Grymonprez” at the top of the façade.

Later Years

In the late 1960s, the Grymonprez firm was also still active in Belgium. They delivered many modern café organs. These were often old Mortier and Decap organs which they modernized, especially the façades, and to which they sometimes added electronics.

It is surprising to see on how many different addresses the firm was to be found, as can be inferred from inscriptions on the organs and the texts of the ads. Why they moved so many times is unknown.

Later, Oscar Grymonprez ran the café “Bourgondisch Kruis” in Leedeberg, and he remarried the owner of the café, Zulma Uyttendaele. From 1970 onwards, they placed many organs in this café, which were also meant to be sold (one can recognize this place by the square ceiling tiles).

It is said that the relationship between father and son deteriorated a lot through the years. Leonard always reproached his father for being a bad businessman. In the

mid-1970s, Oscar and Leonard still owned some instruments, but definitely not a lot. Leonard gradually withdrew from the organ business, and he died on 7 October 1988.

During his last 20 years, Oscar lived with his second wife in a small house in Gentbrugge.



Figure 11. A group photograph taken in café 'Bourgondisch Kruis' in Leedeberg ca.1970. Fourth from left is Leonard Grymonprez; Oscar Grymonprez and his wife Zulma are third and second from right (standing).



Figure 12. The café “Bourgondisch Kruis” in Ledeberg.

Fortunately, from time to time his family took him to a dance hall with a Decap organ. On 22 July 2006, Oscar and Zulma were still present at the organ rally in Goes (see photo in *HP* October 2006, p.202).

Epilogue

No one can deny that Oscar Grymonprez was a man of great merit in the organ world. Although, now, we regret that in the 1950s and 1960s he rebuilt so many historical dance organs and sold them abroad, we should also ask the question: “would these instruments still exist if he hadn’t bought them up?”

As said, there was hardly any interest in this historical heritage in Belgium in those days, and the only destination for these organs was almost certainly demolition. However, thanks to Oscar Grymonprez, these organs still play, albeit abroad. The death of the last person who worked for the Mortier firm definitely marks the end of an era.

Thanks to Björn Isebaert, Jack Jacobs, Keith Pinner and Jan Kees de Ruijter. Unless otherwise mentioned, the photos in this article are from the author's archive.



Figure 14. Another instrument, the Decap *Lucy*, in the exhibition hall of Charles Hart.



Figure 13. Above is a barrel piano at the exhibition hall of Charles Hart, in a large tent near the Verulamium in St.Albans.

Editor's notes: This article originally appeared in the January issue of *Het Pierement*, 2009. Thanks to the *Het Pierement*'s editor, and author, Tom Meijer for permission to republish. Thanks also to Björn Isebaert for providing translation for use in the *Carousel Organ*.



Figure 15. An 84-key Mortier with a composite façade. Later, the organ, with a different façade, became known as the *Golden Mortier* of Dennis Chapell (now S.Loopstra, Beetgum NL).



Figure 16. Oscar Grymonprez in front of the 97-key Mortier organ, No. 943 *Four Columns*, which is still part of the collection of the St. Albans Organ Theatre.



Figure 17. Oscar Grymonprez in front of an 86-key Mortier orchestrion with (rebuilt) façade of another (84-key) organ. Later, this instrument was owned by Walkers, Derbyshire.

Inventory of the organs delivered by Oscar and Leonard Grymonprez to Charles Hart, St.Albans (now the St.Albans Organ Theatre).

This list compiled by Keith Pinner from his own memories (marked with an *) and based on notes by William Walker. Some information was added by Jan Kees de Ruijter.

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| <p>Barrel piano. Painted in light green (see photo). Delivered in the early 1960s.</p> <p>Barrel piano. Wooden case decorated with mirrors.</p> <p>84-key Mortier <i>La Cascade</i> (sold to Brian Oram, St. Mary Bourne)</p> <p>45-key Limonaire <i>Le Petit Diable</i>* (sold to Alf Bennett)</p> <p>46-key Limonaire <i>Silver Cherub</i>* (sold to Mrs. Jessett, Hadlow Down, 1967?)</p> <p>101-key Mortier No. 997* (sold to Gordon Hine, Shaftesbury)</p> <p>97-key Mortier <i>Four Columns</i> No. 943 (collection of St. Albans) Figure 16.</p> <p>95-key Bursens, delivered on 5 February 1970 (collection of St. Albans)</p> <p>92-key Gebr. Decap <i>Jeanneke</i> (collection of St. Albans) Figure 10.</p> <p>121-key Gebr. Decap <i>Nethe</i> (then renamed to <i>England's Pride</i>), delivered in autumn 1966. Restored in 2008 by Roger Mostmans (collection of St. Albans)</p> <p>101-key Mortier <i>Oscar</i> No. 1041, delivered on 13 December 1974 (sold to Watermouth Castle)</p> <p>92-key Gebr. Decap (sold in about 1976 to Stan Brown, Euroclydon Hotel, Drybrook, Gloucestershire. Now owned by Peter Craig)</p> <p>84-key Mortier <i>Venus</i>* (sold to Frank Bond, Taunton, later a.o. Breitenmoser. Now owned by Peter Craig)</p> | <p>86-key Mortier orchestrion* (sold to Barber, Chelford, Cheshire, later Walkers, Derbyshire) Figure 17.</p> <p>68-key Gebr. Decap (sold to Frank Bond, Taunton, later owned by Keith Pinner, who named the organ <i>Lucy</i>)</p> <p>Weber Unika orchestrion* (collection of St. Albans)</p> <p>Weber Maesto orchestrion* (sold to Hathaway and Bowers, USA)</p> <p>Weber Otero orchestrion* (sold to Hathaway and Bowers, USA)</p> <p>98-key Gaudin (ex Gebr. Teugels; sold to Dennis Chappell in Somerset, now in the USA)</p> <p>97-key Mortier (sold to Edwards, Huntingdon, in March 1973 to Doyle, Manchester)</p> <p>101-key Mortier No. 1065 <i>The Bandmaster</i> (sold in August 1972 to John Arthurs, now Dale Riley)</p> <p>80-key Mortier orchestrion with oak façade (sold to Frank Bond, Taunton, now in the USA)</p> <p>101-key Mortier orchestrion No. 227 <i>Maritime</i>. (According to note delivered by R.van den Bosch in July 1968. Sold to Mr. Toombe, Westbourne, Chichester on 4 September 1972. Now Mr. Phillips Southampton)</p> <p>76-key Mortier. No. 856 (sold to Mr. Morgan, Kent, later Joyce Jessett, Hadlow Down)</p> | <p>80-key Mortier oak façade. (sold to Frank Bond, Taunton, April 1969. Exchanged in Mau for an 80-key Frans Decap, see below)</p> <p>80-key Frans Decap (see above)</p> <p>92-key Mortier. No. 938 <i>Broadway</i> (sold to Joe Ephgrave in April 1969, later Searle, now Nick Seymour)</p> <p>101-key Mortier No. 1030 <i>De Vissen</i> (sold to Frank Bond, Taunton, 10 April 1969. Later Breitenmoser, Verbeeck, now NBC)</p> <p>92-key Mortier No. 977 (sold to Robert Finbow, Cotton Mechanical Music Museum)</p> <p>92-key Mortier No. 953 (sold to Mr. Innes, Aberdeenshire. Now Grampian Transport Museum)</p> <p>92-key Mortier (sold to Mr. Burgess, Haddenham in April 1969)</p> <p>78-key Mortier (sold to Frank Bond, Taunton, June 1969. Later Graham Whitehead, now Jonathan Ling)</p> <p>101-key Mortier <i>Velvet Sax</i> No. 1085 (sold to Frank Bond, Taunton, 19 January 1970, now NBC)</p> <p>97-key Mortier No. 955 (sold to Mr. Edwards, Huntingdon, later Mr. Doyle, Manchester)</p> <p>84-key Mortier (sold in January 1970 to Mr. Morgan, in March 1971 to Jessett, Hadlow Down)</p> |
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84-key Mortier No. 898 *The Trumpeter* (sold to Ronald Leach, Kent, now the *Brabançonne*, R. Balseau)

92-key Gebr. Decap *Marie Jeanne* (arrival on 4 February 1970. Sold to Frank Bond, Taunton, in October 1971, now somewhere in England)

92-key Mortier No. 229 (was located in Aalst, Belgium, arrival on 4 February 1970. Possibly the *Neptunus*, Peter Watts)

77-key Clarinet (?) (arrival on 16 February 1973, no further information)

80-key Mortier *Clef* (arrival on 14 April 1973. Restored to playing condition and sold to Mr. Duman, Glasgow. In 1982 to David Vipan)

84-key Alphonse Bursens *Ideal* with so-called banana façade (arrival in February 1973, now David en Lesley Evans, Canada)

72-key Gebr. Decap *Lili* (sold to Mr. and Mrs. K. Wood, Hail Weston, Huntingdon, now Phil Ives, Olney, Bucks.)

101-key Mortier No. 985. *Floreal* (sold to Flora Bloom, Bressingham on 6 October 1973. Later Breitenmoser and now in the automobile museum in Oostvoorne)

80-key Baby Mortier (sold to Mr. Stokes, Cardiff, later to Brian Kinsey)

74-key Frans Decap (sold to Mr. Stokes, Cardiff)

... "Meet Your Member" (continued from page 47)

ing as an organ grinder. I went to the NCC Organ Grind every year and I started thinking about getting my own organ. My first acquisition was a 14-note mechanical organette I bought on e-bay.

In 2001 I decided to order the plans for a John Smith organ. The plans were intimidating, but I finally started building the organ in early in 2002. I was able to work my way through the plans and finally had a finished organ a year later.

At the 2002 MBSI annual meeting in Chicago, Larry Kern was passing out COAA Applications. He said they were going to have a rally in North Tonawanda at the Herschell Carousel Museum. I had just seen the Sanfilippo and Krughoff collections and had my enthusiasm for mechanical music raised another level. Going to a rally close to my old home sold me on joining COAA.

The first COAA rally I attended was the Midway, NY rally in 2003. Ed Ditto came up and said "come play with us." Ed and others showed me the skills and joy of organ grinding. I quickly felt at home and I had a great time. I have been going to rallies ever since. I try to make at least three rallies a year.

I have been contributing to the Rally Edition of the *Carousel Organ*. I sent some pictures to Ron Bopp once for a rally and he really appreciated them. Now I send pictures to Ron regularly. Its requires some extra time during the season but it is always satisfying to see them published in January.

When I retire and have more time I hope to do some more organ building or at least build some different types of pipes and learn how they work.

Belonging to COAA is like being in a big family. The members are always helpful when other members and rally visitors have problems or questions. Every spring I anticipate seeing all the people at the rallies. Leaving the last rally every year is always a sad time since you won't see friends again till next spring. The rally season goes quickly.

I always wonder what I would have been doing for the last dozen years if my Dad hadn't taken me to the Mid-Am rally, and Frank Rider hadn't given me the MBSI application.

COAA Resolution

Ted Guillaum

It is with pleasure that I announce a recent resolution that was passed by the COAA Board of Directors honoring Ron Bopp for his enduring dedication to the publication of the *Carousel Organ* journal for the past ten years. Ron was presented with the resolution March 1st during the mid-winter meeting in Florida. Secretary, Mary Jo Bopp was able to keep a secret and I surprised Ron with the presentation while visiting Bill and Cindy Hall's collection.

Ron has served for ten years as the only editor of our journal and has worked diligently to write articles and to encourage authors to write on every aspect of mechanical music. The articles are scholarly, authoritative, entertaining and colorful. The variety is appealing to anyone that has an interest in the hobby. He works tirelessly to continually improve the quality of the publication and to meeting the deadlines.

Ron is one of the founders of COAA and has always served us well as a quiet leader. He avoids the spotlight but offers needed advice when requested to spread the message of "The Happiest Music On Earth."

Congratulations, and thank you, Ron for ALL the things that you do so well!

