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The DUCHESS mechanical organ

This document was written by Brian Hunt and was originally published by Worthing and District SME in their newsletter in the Autumn of 2011.

Some of our members may have seen and heard a mechanical organ at one of our events at Field Place earlier in the year. Here is a bit of background about how I came to own it. Some of you may know that I have had an interest in pipe organs, be it theatre or mechanical for many years and the chance to have my own 65 key Dutch street style instrument came about in August last year. I have been attending the Essex Country Show at Barleylands Farm, Billericay for some years now and about four years ago I noticed a very sweet-sounding organ being exhibited by a Mr. David England from Norwich. I spent quite a bit of time listening to it and eventually spoke to him.

We chatted for quite a long time because I think he felt that I was genuinely interested in it, which I was. The following year I attended the event and the organ was there again, so another long chat with Mr. England took place. The following year I was unable to attend the show so didn't see the organ. I had been looking at a website for quite a long time, run by a Mr. Melvyn Wright, who is a music supplier for organs and has a section called the Busker Music Site Organs For Sale (this site is worth a visit as it has some amusing articles).

I was looking at the site one evening and noticed the 'Duchess' for sale. I was surprised to see it for sale as I thought David was very attached to it. I was on the phone to him very quickly. I asked if it was really for sale and why. He said he was finding it hard work now and had another project under way at home, so a date was set to view the organ the following Sunday.

Julie and I drove to Norwich that day; we heard the organ play and a deal was done. I understood that I couldn't take delivery until the end of the year as it had Christmas commitments. We actually collected the organ in the middle of January this year.



It turned out that he is a musician and that at one time had built a Wurlitzer theatre organ into his house. This was originally in a theatre in London. Mr. England had built the Street organ to a very high standard in 1996 using an Alan Pell modular kit with a 'Harmonist' electronic music reading system. This has now been updated to the 'Harmidi' system where the music is stored in midi files on computer floppy discs or memory cards. Many of the larger pipes in the organ were made Johnny Ling who is a professional organ builder from Norfolk.

In all, she boasts 244 pipes, snare drum, bass drum with cymbal and 22 note glockenspiel, which is made up of chrome plated steel plates and not alloy, as some small organs have. I believe the steel plates give a much nicer tone.

Here is a breakdown for anyone interested in the specification. The main melody section consists of 6 ranks of pipes 22 in each rank, 2 Bourdon incl. celest (these pipes give it that typical Dutch sound), 2 Violin incl. celest. The centre rank of pipes were originally Piccolo which have been replaced with open Flutes because they are not as high pitched and squeaky as the Piccolos. There is also a new rank of Jan van Eyke pattern Bourdons in the top of the organ, which give it a more full-bodied sound.

There are 56 pipes in the counter melody section made up of Stopped Flutes, Cello and Cello celeste. The accompaniment section has 24 pipes made up of Stopped Flutes and open Cello. Last but not least, the Bass section has 32 pipes made up of Bourdon and Cello ranging from 4 ft to 16 ft pitch, which sound nice and deep.

It has been a bit of a learning curve to own such an instrument because they do strange things when you are not expecting them.

I hope to show the organ at rallies and events in the South of England.