

Obituaries

Herman A.O. Wilms (1934–2021)

Two prominent AES members in Europe died earlier this year, close to the date of the 50th Anniversary of the first AES European convention held in 1971. They were Reinhard O. Sahr and Herman A. O. Wilms. They collaborated on many conventions together and became good friends.

Herman A. O. Wilms

was born in 1934 to Prof. Jan G. A. Wilms and Cecilia P. Scharpe in Ghent, Belgium, where he lived and went to school until 1944, when the family had to move to Leuven. He



studied Greek and Latin for two years before training to be an industrial electrician and then getting his Diploma in Electronic and Audio Engineering in 1957. He had to do the statutory military service until 1958. He started his working life in 1959 teaching at the National Institute of Radio and Cinematography in Vorst, Brussels, where he taught electroacoustics and audio engineering and was there for 30 years, becoming professor and a researcher in room acoustics. He also taught part-time at the Conservatorium in Leuven. While researching for information on audio to teach, he found papers from the AES. He was so impressed that he decided to join as a member in 1969 and quickly became more involved than he could have imagined. He was soon to become a major driving force behind the AES in Europe, both in increasing membership and especially conventions. But first, a little background of the start of the AES in Europe.

In early 1967 AES Headquarters was trying to plan the 20th anniversary of the AES, to be held at the 35th Convention in New York in 1968 and wanted to see if it might be possible to organize papers from AES members from outside of the USA. They approached J. L. Ooms of Philips Phonographic Industries (later known as PolyGram) who was already a member, to see if he would undertake this task. He agreed and approached many of his top contacts around the world. This resulted in 18 authors prepared to write a paper and go to New York to present their work; they were from Europe, Japan, and Latin America. The AES scheduled them at the convention in two sessions, entitled "Audio Abroad" and they were considered a great success.

This large response triggered J. L. Ooms and his assistant Titia Bakker, to mull over



Wilms and Ooms, 1st European convention, 1971

the idea of a European AES branch, bringing the Society and activities to Europe, rather than just delivering European authors to US conventions. He contacted AES Headquarters and the Sections committee in May 1967 and they were agreeable. So Ooms and Baker started recruiting continental European members and their applications were sent to their office in Baarn, the Netherlands. Soon Peter Burkowitz from Deutsche Grammophon in Hannover (also soon to be PolyGram) joined the bandwagon, bringing in colleagues from the German-speaking areas and in mid 1969 arranged a meeting of about 20 chief engineers and other interested people. This brought in even more members, but it soon became clear that international membership payments were a problem.

Meanwhile, Herman heard about all this activity and wrote a letter to J. L. Ooms complaining that the AES was little-known in Belgium. "You can do something about it, by local recruiting" was the answer he received. Ooms also thought that Brussels (with its international financial institutions and multi-currency bank accounts) would be ideally suited to be a central collection point for membership dues from all over Europe, rather than individual members having to make complex payments to the USA. So Ooms asked Herman whether he would be prepared to serve as a liaison point for this purpose and asked him if he could attend the 1969 meeting that Burkowitz was organizing. Herman was very enthusiastic about the results of this meeting and this led to him becoming part of the management of the European AES. His study in his apartment was turned into the AES Europe Office, with a phone and telex machine and soon he became a major driving force behind the AES in Europe, both in increasing the membership and especially in organizing the conventions. Membership hunting was probably one of Herman's favorite activities in the early years and he could be very persuasive. Every new member won was a triumph for him and he would know membership numbers by heart!

In 1971 the first fledgling Central European convention was held in Cologne, Germany, with 269 visitors and 12 exhibitors. This was followed by the second in Munich in 1972. From 1973 the European conventions became part of the main numbering with the 44th AES Convention in Rotterdam, the 47th in

Copenhagen in 1974, and the 50th in London in 1975. In addition, the formation of country-based sections started in continental Europe, beginning with the Belgian section in 1973, followed by the Netherlands and leading to one in almost every European country. Of course, all this success meant that the workload for Herman was going up rapidly too and this was still a part-time activity in the evenings and weekends, as he was still teaching. Inevitably there were problems due to this overload, but he did start getting help, notably from Titia Bakker and he also gradually started to gather a small group of "his children" including his daughter Lut, who helped in the office and at conventions. He retired from teaching in 1989 and the AES became his full-time job until 2002, when Thierry Bergmans took over, having helped Herman for several years.

In total Herman organized the exhibits and logistics for 34 conventions; in Brussels (where he was chairman), Cologne, Rotterdam, Zurich, Berlin (2), Copenhagen (2), London (2), Vienna (2), Hamburg (3), Montreux (3), Amsterdam (5), Munich (5), and Paris (6).

Because he was the point of contact for convention contractors and exhibitors, Herman found it beneficial to speak several languages. Apart from his native Dutch, he became quite fluent in French, German, and English and he could move easily from one to the other, often even in the same sentence. He also became very proficient with finances, taking great care to obtain the maximum return he could for the AES funds, by moving money between the various savings accounts depending on the daily rate. His diligence in building up reserves helped the AES enormously when the financial effects of 9/11 and the economic crash hit.

I first worked with Herman on the 1987 convention in London when I was chairman. I learnt a lot from him and appreciated his hard work, care, and meticulous attention to detail. It was also when I first realized his enthusiasm for new ideas and ways of working. Up until then he would lay out exhibition stands on the very large plans provided by the convention centers. Then he would have to post this layout to the convention chairman, in whichever country he resided, which meant several days elapsed before they could discuss it. With the growing popularity of cheaper fax machines at that time, he came up with a cunning plan to cut the large drawing into A4-size pieces, giving each a number, so he could fax the whole thing to the chairman (in this case me) to reassemble at the receiving end, hopefully in the correct order. Wonderful! We were able to discuss the layout in under an hour.

I also remember his excitement in 2001 at

the prospect of the coming Euro, to start at the beginning of 2002. We were in a restaurant in Munich after a convention committee meeting in late 2001 and he persuaded the manager to give him the bill in Euros, which he did. That made his day! He continued to collect Euro coins from all the participating countries when he realized that the coins were different depending on the country that minted them. He could become a bit obsessive about collecting them, as he did in his quest to have everyone follow ISO standards, especially when it came to writing the date.

Attendees going to the European conventions in the 1980s and 1990s will remember the flags hanging outside the convention center to welcome visitors. Herman had a logo designed for each convention that would be used on the flags, scarves for the Registration staff and other things in the convention, giving a unified look and feel to the event.

As with many enthusiastic and focused people Herman could bring out strong responses in others. I remember in 1994 a group of exhibitors came to me wanting to get rid of him. Herman listened and in 1996 the same group asked me to give him the Gold Medal! I worked with him as a committee colleague for nine years, then as his boss for eight after I became Executive Director. We didn't always see eye to eye, but we each appreciated the other's point of view and worked well as a team. I always thought of him as a tremendous asset to the AES and enjoyed his company when we had a chance to relax.

In spite of the workload, he did have one main hobby and that was listening to music. He particularly enjoyed Renaissance and modern classical music, opera and operetta, and German folk music.

The AES honored him with the Fellowship award in 1976, the Board of Governors award in 1981 and the Bronze Medal in 1997. In 2007 he received the Distinguished Service Medal "for more than 35 years of dedicated service to the AES and to the European region, and conventions in particular." That really sums up Herman's service to the AES and to audio in Europe. The AES owes Herman a tremendous debt of gratitude for all his hard work and enthusiasm. He will be missed by the many people who came into contact with him over the years. An AES Oral History interview with Herman A. O. Wilms is available to purchase on the AES website.

Herman died onq March 11, 2021 and is survived by his daughter Lut. His wife Madeleine, who accompanied him to most of the European conventions, died in 2014. I would like to thank Lut and Titia for providing information to help write this obituary.

Roger Furness