
The concertina as an emblem of the folk music revival in the British Isles

Stuart Eydmann

The post-war folk and traditional music revival in the British Isles was a complex phenomenon which involved more than just the simple rediscovery and promotion of neglected music and song. The ideology of key individuals was important in determining the scope and subsequent direction of the revival including the sources of the revived repertory and how it should be re-packaged. The selection and use of appropriate musical instruments was a major issue and, for a time at least, the concertina family was endorsed by the revivalists to the extent that it could act as a symbol of the revival itself. This paper identifies and discusses the processes involved.

THE CONCERTINA enjoyed considerable popularity throughout the British Isles in the hundred years following its first commercial production around 1840.¹ At first the instrument was expensive and exclusive and was heard only playing “art” music in the upper-class drawing room and fashionable London concert hall. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, the concertina was available in a range of forms and prices which allowed it to be taken up by the middle and working classes who, owing to increased leisure time, increased disposable income and low prices through mass production, were able to indulge in the widespread ownership of musical instruments for the first time. The concertina found favour with both urban and rural musicians and gained a place in evangelistic activities, concertina bands, the music hall, dance

¹ For brief introductions to the history of the concertina see Romani & Benyon 1980 and Pilling 1983. This paper was written as a means of testing my thoughts relating to the crucial moments and processes of the revival while preparing the relevant chapter of my doctoral thesis (Eydmann 1995) under the supervision of Dr. Peter Cooke and Dr. Richard Middleton. It was presented at a conference on “Current Research on Music in Scotland” in honour of Peter Cooke, 30.iv.1995, Edinburgh. My studies drew upon a programme of field work undertaken in the 1980s through which I located, interviewed and recorded concertina players formerly active during the 1920s and 1930s as well as players of the revival. The field recordings will be deposited with the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh in due course.

music and domestic music making. Only rarely was it found as an instrument used solely for the performance of traditional music.

The purchase and use of musical instruments of all types by amateurs declined rapidly between the wars due to competition from other attractions including modern dance, the gramophone radio and the cinema. Furthermore, the effects of the Second World War and the subsequent comprehensive redevelopment of the cities and towns broke up social structures with drastic consequences for their musical activities. There were survivals of concertina use in English folk dance, in the traditional music of the West of Ireland and in South Africa, but by the 1950s it was mainly restricted to a residual number of individuals playing in the mission halls, Salvation Army, variety theatre and in the home.

Despite this pattern of popularity followed by decline, the late 1960s found the concertina once more in great demand among young people. Instruments were being reclaimed from dusty cupboards and junk shops, and pawnbrokers were scoured for "boxes".² In a short time the instrument was being heard on folk song records, in concerts and in folk clubs, achieving endorsement as one of the principal instruments for accompanying traditional song. For many adherents of the revival, ownership of a concertina became *de rigueur*. New makers arose to meet the demand, and several players became professional concertinists playing the international folk music circuit and making commercial recordings.

Taking Scotland as a sample, we find many of the most popular revival singers, such as Archie Fisher and Ian MacKintosh, using the concertina as well as the guitar and banjo to accompany their songs. Later it found a place in many of the emerging folk groups (e.g. The Corries, The Clutha, The McAlmans, The Boys of the Lough, The Gaugers, The Whistlebinkies and The Battlefield Band) where it was used for the performance of fiddle and bagpipe music as well as for song accompaniment. Solo concertina competitions were established by the Traditional Music and Song Association of Scotland at its festivals from 1974 onwards.

In the mid-1970s the term "concertina consciousness"³ was coined to describe the fever of interest in the instrument. A gramophone record entitled *The Folk Review Record*, issued in 1975, featured a sleeve design made up of a honeycomb of concertina ends, despite the fact that the instrument was hardly heard on the disc.⁴ Some years later, when Virgin Records sought to promote their folk music issues, they did so by an advertisement showing a woodcut of an elderly concertina player.⁵ These examples show that the concertina had become an emblem of the folk music revival but how did the instrument move from

² Contraction of "squeezebox", a popular name for the concertina or accordion.

³ This term was associated with the magazine *Free Reed* (formerly *The Concertina Newsletter*), which was established by the instrument collector and concertina historian Neil Wayne around 1971 to cater for enthusiasts.

⁴ Advertisement in *Folk Review*. 5.1 (November 1975).

⁵ Probably William Kimber. Advertisement in *Folk Roots* 26.9 (August 1985).

almost total obscurity to fashion within only a few years?⁶ How was an instrument used only occasionally for the performance of traditional music privileged to the status of a symbol of the tradition itself? To answer these questions we must, first of all, look to turn of the century England and the foundations of the so called “first folk song revival” (Lloyd 1967: 395) there.

Cecil Sharp’s first encounter with folk dance was in 1899 through the performance of a morris dance team at Headington Quarry, Oxfordshire. This team was led by concertina player William Kimber. Kimber was adopted by Sharp not only as his major source of information on dance and its music on which to base his revival but also as a model of the “tradition-bearer”, a missing link with the romantic past of Merrie England. In the words of Douglas Kennedy:

What Kimber had from his father and from his father before him was the experience and technique of a skilled craft handed down, as if through a guild, from the Middle Ages, and stretching far back before that to the secret societies which practiced the medicine religions that conditioned life in England before Christendom. (Kennedy 1964: 44)

That Kimber was a most accomplished and sensitive performer of traditional music is without doubt (as can be heard on gramophone recordings⁷) but adoption by Sharp as his mentor is contradictory on a number of counts.

Firstly, rather than being of ancient pedigree, Kimber’s morris side had been revived only a few months beforehand through the encouragement of a local antiquarian. Secondly, Kimber was a relatively young man (around 27). Thirdly, he played a then “trendy” instrument laden with connotations of music hall and popular dance and song which hardly fitted recognition of the concertina as a “modern substitute for the one-handed pipe and tabor, the one man band familiar in Shakespeare’s day” (Kennedy 1964: 43). It has also been suggested by Keith Chandler that, in the late nineteenth century, morris dancing was encouraged as a form of “rational recreation” designed to occupy workers during slack periods in their employment.⁸

It is no surprise to find a few years later that Percy Grainger used the concertina in a number of his works: *Shepherd’s hey*, based on a morris dance tune collected by Cecil Sharp, *Bold William Taylor* a traditional song collected in 1906 and his *Scotch strathspey and reel* of 1911. Of course, it was a “classical” rather than a “traditional” concertina player who took part in the public performances of these works.⁹ Such examples of middle-class and artistic endorsement were important later.

⁶ I have borrowed the idea of musical instruments as “emblems” from Nettle (1985: 51-4), who discusses how certain instruments act as the symbols of individual nation states.

⁷ For example *The art of William Kimber*, Topic Records 12T249.

⁸ Broadcast talk in *Folk on 2* (BBC Radio 2, 27.iv.94).

⁹ Grainger’s *Folk song settings* were performed at the Aeolian Hall, London on 28 May 1912 with Christine Hawkes on English concertina (Bird 1976: end-papers).

Despite the discovery of Kimber and other indigenous players, the concertina remained on the fringe of the subsequent folk dance revival in England, its musicians preferring the piano, and later, the piano accordion. One good example of the marginalisation of the instrument is found in the reminiscence of a pupil of Kimber who joined the English Folk Dance and Song Association in 1936. At this time, dancing at its London headquarters was accompanied by "an orchestra" whose members viewed his performance on concertina "with a horrified stare" (Loveless 1955: 16).

An examination of the large number of discs issued by Topic Records of London, the principal publishers of the revival, brings us close to an understanding of the subsequent integration of the concertina into the modern revival. Of the 248 long-playing discs issued by Topic between the late 1950s and 1978, around one quarter (68) featured the concertina (see *Topic Catalogue* 1978). Highly influential among the early releases from Topic was a series of "theme" albums covering various aspects of traditional music and song of the British Isles. For many listeners, these records, which included both traditional and revival musicians, were a first introduction to a hidden heritage of music and song.

Typical of this series is *The iron muse* (Topic Records 12T86), published in part in the late 1950s and reissued (and expanded) in 1963. Like others in the series, the disc was compiled, arranged and produced by A. L. Lloyd who, as Artistic Director of the company from 1957, "used this increasingly influential position...to select what was suitable from his perspective for club performers in Britain" (Harker 1985: 236). The content of the record reflected Lloyd's interest in the extractive and manufacturing industries which had found earlier expression in his influential book *Come all ye bold miners* (Lloyd 1952) and other works.

Although the method and ideology of Lloyd's reconstruction of the industrial musical heritage is controversial, its influence has been great (see Harker 1985, Shepard 1986, Palmer 1986, Gammon 1986). Harker (1985) has shown how Lloyd worked within "the folksong consensus" of Cecil Sharp, Vaughan Williams and others of the first English Folk Song Revival; it is thus no surprise to find that, at first, Lloyd was adamant that folk song should be performed unaccompanied (Lloyd & Vaughan Williams 1959: 9). However, he did later come to accept instrumental backing in the face of the influence of the dominant forms of youth music: skiffle, rock and roll and American "folk" (Lloyd 1967: 397).

In reluctantly accepting the instrumental accompaniment of folk song, Lloyd was obliged to sanction treatment which was appropriate in ideological as well as musical terms. In doing so he turned to the concertina. The instrument was small, unobtrusive and portable. It was versatile, with a potential for many accompaniment styles including melodic, chordal or drone playing. However, there were other considerations. The instrument already enjoyed endorsement by Sharp and Grainger, it was British (i.e. non-American) and, most importantly, it was an instrument born in and of the industrial revolution and came laden with working class associations.

The iron muse uses the concertina as song accompaniment on 12 out of 17 tracks. On all but one track it is played by Alf Edwards, a professional musician who learned concertina as he grew up in a music hall family. Edwards brought accomplished, confident playing and entered into the spirit and character of each piece with little sign that he was reading directly from sheet music. His accompaniments include jaunty chordal playing on Matt McGinn's *The Foreman O'Rourke* and a "barrel organ whine" to *Come a' ye tramps and hawkers*. But it is the lively heterophony of the fiddle, concertina and voice on *The spinner's wedding* and *The Dundee lassie* which typifies the accompaniment style on the record. Edwards subsequently appeared on many other discs produced by Lloyd.

Lloyd's reconstruction and rehabilitation of industrial song was shared by the singer Ewan MacColl, with whom he cooperated from the late 1940s onwards. Both toured England and Scotland in the 1950s with Alf Edwards as accompanist and all three worked together with Peggy Seeger and others between 1957 and 1964 on the compilation of *The radio ballads*, broadcast documentaries which used actuality material, music and song. MacColl recalls the musical preparations for these:

Peggy spent a fortnight making and writing out the musical arrangements and compiling tapes and scores for the musicians. Some of the scores had whole sections left in them for the musicians to improvise (which baffled Alf Edwards, the concertina wizard, for the first three or four radio ballads; he afterwards became quite proficient at, as he put it, surviving without the dots). (MacColl 1990: 324)

Lloyd and MacColl collaborated on several projects, including a number which featured their mutual interest in shanties and sea songs, Scottish and English ballads and industrial song. Edwards' involvement in these and on other records by MacColl helped spread and consolidate the combination of English concertina and voice as a sound ideal of the revival. The popular image of the concertina as an instrument of sea shanty accompaniment was largely due to the influence of these collaborations.

The iron muse also features a young revival singer, Louis Killen of Newcastle, accompanying himself on English concertina in a new industrial song *Farewell to the Monty*. Killen made other recordings for Topic before emigrating to the United States, where he has contributed greatly to the more recent revival of interest in the concertina there. In a brief memoir, he describes how he worked out his accompaniments in isolation by just feeling his way around the instrument, preserving what worked and abandoning what did not sound right to his ear (Killen 1983).

Other young singers adopted the concertina. These included Peggy Seeger, Sandra Kerr and John Faulkner who were associated with The Critics Group of London, an association which tackled aspects of repertory, song content, presentation and accompaniment in a workshop situation. Bob Blair of Kirkcaldy (now Glasgow) was a member of the group at that time and recalls that

the musical skill and proselytizing zeal of Peggy Seeger was a major force in spreading the gospel of concertina playing in the revival:

Peggy's theories were quite clear on the use of the concertina.... Peggy had quite, a quite strong theory of accompaniment, how songs should be accompanied, certainly how British songs should be accompanied as distinct to American and the concertina lends itself to the style of accompaniment quite remarkably. Oh, without a doubt! Alf [Edwards] was the first guy [but] Alf was restricted. Alf always used music. Alf would not accompany Ewan or anybody without a bit o' music in front of them and that certainly didnae fit into Ewan's scheme o' things or the way he saw music performed.

As Peggy learned the concertina he stopped using Alf.... Peggy's accompaniments...fit in with her theory of how songs should be accompanied: never interfering with the singer, adding to them, lifting the song occasionally, putting a wee tag in if necessary but never interfering with the song. (interview, iv.94)

Blair remembers how Seeger held weekly concertina classes for members of the Critics Group and ran accompaniment "workshops" at folk song seminars throughout England and Scotland during the late 1960s and early 1970s at which she demonstrated the potential of the instrument.

The modern folk music revival has also involved a rediscovery of instrumental music played for listening and the concertina is implicated in this too. Turning again to the influential *The Iron Muse* we find Lloyd opening and closing each side of the record with a short selection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dance tunes from Scotland and Northumberland which, in title at least, have associations with the extractive and manufacturing industries (*The bonnie pit laddie*, *The jolly colliers*, *The weaver's march* etc.). The music was played by an ad hoc group of musicians under the title The Celebrated Working Man's Band. Of the "miners' tunes" Lloyd (1963) says:

In the past the colliers' tradition of folk dance was strong, and even today some of the finest sword dance teams in Europe are to be found among the miners of Tyneside and Yorkshire.... The melodies here are of the kind that the North Eastern miners enjoyed in the pubs at Pay Week, or at weddings, or on the dusty green of the pit villages of a Sunday evening...latterly, in the pit villages the dances were played by small groups comprising, say, fiddle, concertina (melodeon) or pipe and cello or drum. Our modest band is formed on the model of such humble ensembles.

Colin Ross, who played fiddle on the record, recalled (pers. comm. iv.92) how the choice of instrumental music was made by Lloyd who drew much of it on the strength of appropriate titles from John Peacock's collection for the Northumbrian Pipes (Peacock 1805), James Oswald's books (Oswald 1746-69) or the antiquarian collection *Northumbrian minstrelsy* (Bruce & Stokoe 1882). An examination of the last mentioned collection shows two of the tunes (*Keelman o'er the land* and *Sma' coals and little money*) printed together, exactly as they are performed on the record (Stokoe 1882.2: 21).¹⁰ Although from northeast

¹⁰ This is not surprising when we note that Lloyd contributed the foreword to the 1965 facsimile edition (Bruce & Stokoe 1965: v-xxii).

England, Ross had no experience of these tunes before he heard Alf Edwards play them from the written page during the recording sessions. These and other Northumbrian tunes achieved great popularity later in the revival through the playing of Colin Ross and the concertina virtuoso Alistair Anderson.

My own fieldwork has shown that Lloyd's description of pit-village ensembles was correct; I have confirmed that such bands did exist in the mining areas of Scotland and northeast England until well into this century. However, writing in the 1960s, Lloyd was again looking to an idealised past. Although social dance was still thriving in the mining areas, its accompaniment had been modernised through the use of the accordion, drum kits, piano, saxophone and trumpet, and the repertory reflected a wider canon of popular music. Furthermore, Lloyd's promotion of the model of the older type of ensemble (i.e. ad hoc, informal, radical and unrestrained) tended to isolate and privilege just one aspect of what had been an eclectic "plebeian tradition" (Gammon & Gammon 1991). In doing so, he ignored the reality of other modern forms of music already highly integrated into industrial society (such as choirs, amateur orchestras and brass bands) which in their inherent organisation, patronage, uniformity and control carried messages which conflicted with his own ideology. Nevertheless, Lloyd's formula was highly influential: a similar approach to repertory, instrumentation and presentation found early expression in emerging groups such as The High Level Ranters in Newcastle upon Tyne and The Clutha in Glasgow.¹¹

Conclusions

This brief examination of just one aspect of the folk music revival illustrates how susceptible to changes in fashion music can be. In fact, the continuing revival has already moved on, taking new paths and adopting new emblems. It shows how even that which we like to regard as "the tradition" (with its stable, permanent, enduring characteristics) is not exempt from such change and can in fact be, or is constantly, re-constructed by society to suit its own needs. In the case of the concertina, revival was undertaken in almost total isolation from the past, at least as far as the conventional *source musician—revival musician* relationship is concerned. Few of the revival concertina players I have encountered learned by working closely with old-time musicians. Given the gulf between older players and those of the revival, I must conclude that currently popular ideas in the field of traditional music such as "a living tradition", "a carrying stream" or "a river of sound" are misleading and of little use in this context.¹²

¹¹ The High Level Ranters used fiddle, concertina, guitar, small-pipes, accordion and vocals, while The Clutha featured fiddles, two concertinas, small-pipes, guitar and vocals. The repertory of both groups was centred on rediscovered local music and song. A later stimulus to the revival of interest in the concertina was the "discovery" by players in Scotland and England of the lively Irish tradition of traditional dance music played on the concertina.

¹² *The Carrying Stream* is the title of the newsletter of the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh. *The Living Tradition* is a folk music magazine published in Scotland. *A River of Sound* is the title of a recent RTE television series on Irish traditional music.

My suggestion that a small number of individuals influenced the revival's early direction through active promotion rather than passive rediscovery tells only part of the story and ignores the rôle of the non-élite participants in the revival. The adoption and use of musical instruments within the revival also relied upon the compliance of the "rank and file" players and their audiences, and this is a whole area worthy of detailed study. Here it is only possible to suggest a few key components of this complex process.

The recovery of old instruments from dusty cupboards was an important process in itself as musicians (or would-be musicians) entered into the same spirit of "rescue" or "collecting" which drove the gatherers of songs, texts and tunes. They were collecting material rather than musical items, for surely these too are an important parts of the "cultural inventory". Although this is a difficult area, there would also appear to have been some personal drive to recover and revive something more than just music and instruments. For many players I would suggest that there was an attempt to regain or maintain links with a past more recent and personal than the distant "Golden Age" sought by Sharp and Lloyd. A major motivation behind my own interest in the concertina was the family folklore that a great-uncle (one whom I remember fondly but never heard play) was a concertina player. Similarly, Geordie MacIntyre of Glasgow, a prominent singer in the early days of the revival there, recalled to me how the memories (and surviving instruments) of deceased relatives who played the concertina stimulated a degree of responsibility to maintain the family tradition despite the fact that he had no direct experience of their music. A younger revival player living in Edinburgh, Tom Ward, told me that an enduring and influential childhood memory of an elderly concertina player at a Burns Supper in a Fife village during the 1950s was a major influence on his later adoption of the instrument. Another young revival player resident in the same city, Norman Chalmers, credits his interest in the concertina to early pleasant memories of a family friend who would allow him to play on the instrument when he was on visits to his home.

In conclusion, there is always an ideological basis for musical revival. Recognition and promotion of the perceived artistic and cultural value of the music is only part of the process.

REFERENCES

- Bird, John (1976) *Percy Grainger*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Bruce, John Collingwood & Stokoe, John. (eds.) (1882) *Northumbrian Minstrelsy. A collection of bag-pipe tunes, chiefly of the olden time, adapted to the Northumbrian small-pipes*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.
- _____, ed. (1965) *Northumbrian Minstrelsy. A collection of the ballads, melodies and small-pipe tunes of Northumbria*. Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates Inc.
- Eydmann, Stuart (1993) *On the box: the concertina in Glasgow 1910-1940*. Edinburgh: private publication.
- _____. (1995) *The life and times of the concertina: the adoption and usages of a novel musical instrument with particular reference to Scotland*. Unpubl. PhD thesis, Open University.

- Gammon, Vic (1986) "A. L. Lloyd and history: a reconsideration of aspects of *Folk song in England* and some of his other writings." In Russell 1986: 147-164.
- _____ & Gammon, Sheila (1991) "'Repeat and twiddle' to 'precision and snap': the musical revolution of the mid-nineteenth century." In Trevor Herbert, (ed.) *Bands: the brass band movement in the 19th and 20th centuries*, 120-44. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Harker, Dave (1985) *Fakesong: The manufacture of British "folksong", 1700 to the Present Day*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Kennedy, Douglas (1964) *English folk dancing today and yesterday*. London: G. Bell.
- Killen, Louis (1983) "A portrait of the 'tina player as a young cat." In *Concertina* 1.3: 8-11.
- Lloyd, A. L., ed. (1952) *Come all ye bold miners: ballads and songs of the coalfields*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- _____ (1963) *The iron muse*. Liner notes to gramophone record. Topic Records 12T86.
- _____ (1967) *Folk song in England*. London: (1969 edition) Panther.
- _____ & Vaughan Williams, R. (1959) *The Penguin book of English folksongs*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Loveless, Rev. Kenneth (1955) "The story of an Anglo concertina." *Newsletter of the International Concertina Association*, volume unspecified: 16.
- MacColl, Ewan (1990) *Journeyman: an autobiography*. London:
- Nettl, Bruno (1985) *The Western impact on world music: change, adaptation and survival*. New York: Schirmer.
- Oswald, James (1747-69) *The Caledonian pocket companion*. 15 volumes. London.
- Palmer, Roy (1986) "A. L. Lloyd and industrial song." In Russell 1986: 133-146.
- Peacock, John (1805) *A favourite collection of tunes with variations adapted for the Northumberland small pipes, violin or flute*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: W. Wright.
- Pilling, Julian (1983) "Concertina." In Denis Arnold (ed.) *The new Oxford companion to music*, vol. 1: 459-62. Oxford Univ. Press.
- Romani, G. and Benyon Ivor (1980) "Concertina." In Stanley Sadie (ed.) *New Grove dictionary of music and musicians* vol. 4: 625-6. London: Macmillan.
- Russell, Ian, ed. (1986) *Singer, song and scholar*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Shepard, Leslie (1986) "A. L. Lloyd—a personal view." In Russell 1986: 125-32.
- _____ (1978) *The Topic catalogue*. London: Topic Records.

Stuart Eydmann graduated from The Glasgow School of Art in 1975 and has pursued a career in heritage conservation. As a player of Scottish traditional music he has been involved in many broadcasting, recording, teaching and performing projects and has taken part in a number of foreign exchange programmes. He received the Glenfiddich Living Scotland Award for research into free-reed instruments and their players in Scotland, which led to his 1995 doctoral degree from The Open University (supervised by Peter Cooke). He has recently completed a chapter on popular music for the forthcoming *Compendium of Scottish ethnology* and is preparing a companion to Scottish traditional music for publication. Address: 2 St. John's Terrace, Edinburgh EH12 6NW, Scotland.