

John Kirkpatrick writes -

"I was shocked and appalled to see in the first issue of the Concertina Newsletter, the remark that "The English Concertina is superior in every way" (i.e. to the Anglo). In a publication of this sort, aimed at specialists, and knowledgeable enthusiasts, a dogmatic assertion such as this is completely out of place.

In some ways the Anglo is undeniably superior to the English. Simple dance tunes, such as those used for Morris and Sword in this country, fall easily onto an Anglo and its single action makes for bright, gutsy music. Chords are easy to fit in to emphasise this quality, although of course, only in a very limited range of keys. Nevertheless a full 40 keyed Anglo is fully chromatic in the middle two octaves and in the hands of a competent player can achieve all the subtlety of an English, but still with the brightness which characterises the Anglo.

I am sick and tired of hearing in Folk Clubs round the country that the English is the only one of its family worth serious consideration as a musical instrument. I am more than willing to spend the rest of my life attempting to prove otherwise.

5. An Outline History of the Concertina and Related Instruments

Concertinas, and the many instruments related to them belong to the "Free-reed" family of musical instruments. All these free-reed instruments such as the mouthorgan, Melodion, Accordion, Harmonium, and even the humble Jews Harp, produce musical sounds when the tuned metal reeds which they contain are caused to vibrate by means of air pressure from mouth or from moveable bellows.

Of the primitive Free-reed instruments that are the concertina's forbears, the Jews Harp or Guimbarde is perhaps the most widespread, being found in various wooden or metal forms in native musical culture all over the world. As with other inventions, it was left to the Chinese to really develop these primitive free-reed instruments into the very sophisticated Sheng (Japanese Sho), a form of mouthorgan using skilfully cut brass reeds, set in the ends of polished bamboo pipes, and all set in a lacquered gourd. These instruments, still used all over the Far East, and produce a delicate, sweet sound, with silvery, chords in strange harmonies, and have changed little since their appearance over 2000 years ago.

In 1777, when there was little knowledge of these reed instruments outside Europe, Pere Amiot, a traveller and writer on Chinese instruments, sent a Sheng to Paris as a gift. Even before it reached Paris, the instrument had roused much curiosity amongst instrument makers and musicians across Europe, and by 1810, metal free reeds had been incorporated into small organs, by the Parisien organ builder Grenie in 1810, and into Haeckl's "Physharmonica", that is, a "bellows-harmonica", in 1818.

In Europe, there now began a rapid development of new instruments embodying the free-reed principle, such as C.F.L. Buschmann's Mund-Harmonica (Mouthorgan) and Hand-Harmonica, Cyril Demian's Accordion and the first English free-reed invention, Charles Wheatstone's Symphonium of 1829. Wheatstone (1802-1875) trained as a physicist, was brought up in London by his uncle, a musical instrument maker: having travelled Europe and seen the new family of instruments being developed there, he designed

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and patented the Symphonium, a small mouthorgan with reeds contained in a metal box and operated by buttons on each side. This instrument was a considerable technological advance, for Wheatstone not only sought out the best alloys to give durability and steady pitch to the notes, but also evolved the brilliant "English" fingering system, in which the natural notes of the scale alternate on each side of the instrument and have their relative accidentals next to them. This system facilitates rapid playing of runs and scales, and has made the English concertina one of the easiest instruments with which to sight-read from music. Though his patent for the Symphonium shows how closely the principle of the Symphonium was derived from that of the Sheng, Wheatstone soon constructed a "bellows powered" version of this instrument, and this design, the Concertina, was perfected and patented by 1844. Wheatstone relied heavily on the skills of a Swiss craftsman, Louis Lachenal, in these early years, of concertina making, and though the earliest true concertinas were often only single-action, and had only 22, 28 or 35 notes, by the time the design was patented, the 48 key, double action, hexagonal "English" system concertina was firmly established, and the basic design was little changed for the next 60 years.

The new instrument was a great success. It was quickly adopted into high class musical society and many virtuoso professional players of the instrument soon appeared, together with a rapidly widening circle of amateur players. Famous players of mid-Victorian times included Giulio Regondi and Richard Blagrove, who composed and arranged extensively for the instrument, George Case and A. B. Sedgwick, who also began to manufacture and sell the instrument after the expiry of Wheatstone's patents; on the amateur side, numerous Cabinet Ministers and assorted gentry and royalty took it up, Shackleton taking a concertina to the Pole, and Livingstone one to the Equator!

By late 1850's, the instrument had clearly become popular with the musically-minded masses, for not only do the musical papers and journals of the times abound with reviews and announcements of concerts, societies, competitions, and new music for the instrument, but also many new manufacturers were springing up. Most notable and long-lived of these was Lachenals, the firm founded by Wheatstone's former employee, who left the house of Wheatstone, taking with him much technical and marketing expertise, and, it is alleged, a complete set of concertina-making tools! Minor makers of the period included Sedgwick, Simpson, Nicholds, Joseph Scates, Rock Chidley (a nephew of Charles Wheatstone), Ebbelwhite, Shakespeare, Metzler, Journet, Hyam, Myers, George Case, Thomas Dawkins, and so on..... but very little is known about most of these manufacturers, or even if they were actually manufacturers at all - as in some cases only a few instruments by these makers still exist, and as the labels may represent just the name of the vendor or wholesaler, not the maker, absolute identification is often a problem. As the 19th century drew to a close, more instrument makers turned their hands to making concertinas, and more types and variants of the instrument began to be produced. The Duet concertinas, first patented by Wheatstone and Company in 1867 but in existence earlier, was a larger instrument with full chromatic scales for each hand, enabling melody and accompaniment to be played, while the Anglo-chromatic or Anglo-German concertina, in which a different note sounds on push and on pull, achieved a rapid rise in popularity, being much cheaper easier to play by ear, and just right for country dance and the songs of the folk. By 1905 Lachenal and Company had produced up to 300,000 of their 30 key anglo, which sold for from 12/6d. to 25/-. Also G. Jones, H. Crabb, and Jeffries were producing and exporting high quality Anglos in great quantities.

Thus the concertina, from being a musically "respectable" instrument, written for by Tchaikovsky, Berlioz and Rossini, began to be more popular with the working people of this country, being adopted by many music hall artistes, such as the great Percy Honri, and popular concert performers, of whom the greatest was the duet player, Alexander Prince, both of whom recorded vast numbers of 78 rpm records, and also by traditional music makers, notably the musician of Headington Quarry Morris, William Kimber, from whom Cecil Sharp learned so much of the music and lore of the Morris. Many Concertina Bands were formed in the first decades of this century, and more needful than ever of new customers, both Wheatstones and Lachenals turned out Contrabass, Bass, Baritone, Tenor-Treble, Treble, Soprano, Piccolo and even miniature Concertinas, enabling complete orchestral and band scores to be played by gatherings of concertina enthusiasts.

But for all the new uses to which the instrument was being put, its popularity was clearly on the decline by the 1930's, for a variety of reasons: home-produced music in general was dying, the gramophone and later, the radio, rapidly taking the place of the musical evening; though high quality concertinas were still being made, prices had risen continually, large Duets often costing well over £100 in 1935. Mass production of cheaply made instruments, and the flood of inexpensive German and French Melodeons, Accordions, Harmonicas and crude Anglo-German concertinas did much harm to the remaining British concertina makers: Lachenal and Co., Wheatstone's main competitor, went out of business in the late 1930's, leaving a much reduced Wheatstone & Co., and the small family firm of Harry Crabb as the world's sole makers of quality concertinas. Also, the concertina did not seem to be an instrument readily taken up by the younger generation of those days, and the instruments of old players were consigned to attics, junkshops or just thrown away.

The last few years, however, have seen a remarkable revival of interest in the concertina, its history and its music, arising mainly out of that other great revival of the last decades, the Folk Revival. Far from being a dusty curio that Grandad once played, many hundreds of young people are rediscovering the concertina as a superb instrument for folk song accompaniment, Morris dance playing, and as a solo instrument for Ballads, Airs, Jigs, Shanties and Reels. Few are the Folk Clubs that do not see at least one concertina player a week, and few too are the Folk groups and singers who have yet to realise the charm and musical individuality that these old instruments can lend to any interpretation of traditional music. As some indication of this revival, within three months of its first issue the number of subscribers to the Concertina Newsletter multiplied nearly four times, almost all becoming interested in the instrument through contact with it in Folk Clubs. Even the great potential of the instrument for classical and light music is being rediscovered, and the International Concertina Association, based in London, sponsors three evening classes for beginners and more advanced players, and holds regular meeting for playing and practice of such music.

Neil Wayne

6. Why I Play the Concertina - by Richard Cross

I inherited my father's concertina. He was a Geordie miner, and one of my earliest recollections is of him playing "The Bells" - a great favourite.

A lot of miners played the concertina, and now it seems strange to me that these tough young men, with their coaldust scarred hands, could raise such delicate and gay music. But at any party, just as sure as some of the men would dress in womens' clothes for the delight of the "lasses" (an English tradition?), there would be a concertinist playing jigs, ballads, and hymns.