

THE CONCERTINA

Dick Henrywood

I have no idea how many different musical instruments there are or have been, but those popularly played today must be a fraction of the total. The traditional instruments of the orchestra are significantly outnumbered by many others, including some esoteric oddities, which never rose to prominence or have simply fallen out of fashion. But for an enthusiastic folk revival in the 1960s and 1970s, numbered amongst these might well have been the concertina.

It is a small hand-held instrument, one member of a family which all work on the same 'free reed' principle. Others include the accordion, melodeon and humble harmonica or mouth organ. They all derive their sound from small metal reeds which vibrate when air is forced over them. In the case of the mouth organ this is done by sucking or blowing; in its

more complicated cousins the air pressure is created by bellows. Each note requires a separate reed and thus a system of buttons, internal levers and valves is required to select which reed or reeds are to vibrate.

The difference between the various free reed instruments is not generally appreciated, with confusion between the names, but they do share with the violin and piano the existence of a popular name. In the case of the violin it is the fiddle; the piano is the Joanna (from Cockney rhyming slang); and with the concertina and its cousins it is the squeezebox.

The concertina is the smallest of the family, normally with hexagonal or octagonal ends containing the mechanism and the reeds, separated by bellows, usually with between four and eight folds. The number of buttons, and hence the number of notes available to be played, varies between 20 and as many as 100, depending on the type of concertina (yes, there are several different types) and the sophistication of the individual instrument. They were produced in quite large numbers but were all handmade and each customer could, and often did, request special features.

It was originally invented in 1829 by Sir Charles Wheatstone of electric Wheatstone bridge fame. He designed a small metal instrument called the symphonium with reeds operated by buttons and levers but blown by mouth, like the mouth organ. Examples are rare and highly collectable. The addition of bellows to make a more useful instrument followed almost immediately evolving into a standard form with wooden ends separated by leather bellows. Developments continued throughout the 19th century and various small manufacturers became established in London. Wheatstone remained one of the major makers, their main competitor being Louis Lachenal, who left Wheatstone in the 1850s supposedly taking tools, jigs and important workers with him. Other



Figure 1. Sepia postcard, undated but c.1910. Not postally used but inscribed on the back 'Uncle Dick Crandell and his pal'.

smaller firms included Edward and Rock Chidley (both ex-Wheatstone), John Crabb, Jabez Austin (subsequently George Jones) and George Case.

The instrument became very



Figure 2. Comic postcard 'Oi!' designed by Beatrice Mallet and published by Raphael Tuck & Sons Ltd in their 'Oilette' series. Posted in 1939.



Figure 3. Posed real-photographic postcard 'Shall I Be An Angel, Daddy?' (Songs some people should not sing)', published by James Bamforth Ltd. Posted in 1904.

popular in later Victorian times and probably reached its peak before and just after the First World War. Quality instruments continued to be made into the 1930s, particularly by Wheatstone, who absorbed Lachenal in 1935, but the outbreak of the Second World War proved virtually terminal. After the war Wheatstone struggled on, along with Harry Crabb, eventually succeeded by his son, but Wheatstone ended up as part of Boosey & Hawkes before their final demise, and Crabb closed down in the late 1980s.

In its heyday the concertina was a popular social phenomenon, used for private amusement (figure 1) as much as for public performance. Its popularity can be measured by its frequent appearance in comic guises (figures 2 and 3) and on contemporary cigarette cards (figures 4 and 5).

It was held in high regard as a serious musical instrument, and some classical composers wrote special pieces. Several noted performers emerged including a blind musician called George Young (figure 6) and a virtuoso soloist Alexander Prince (figure 7). Some versions of George Young's postcard are inscribed 'yours merrily' instead of

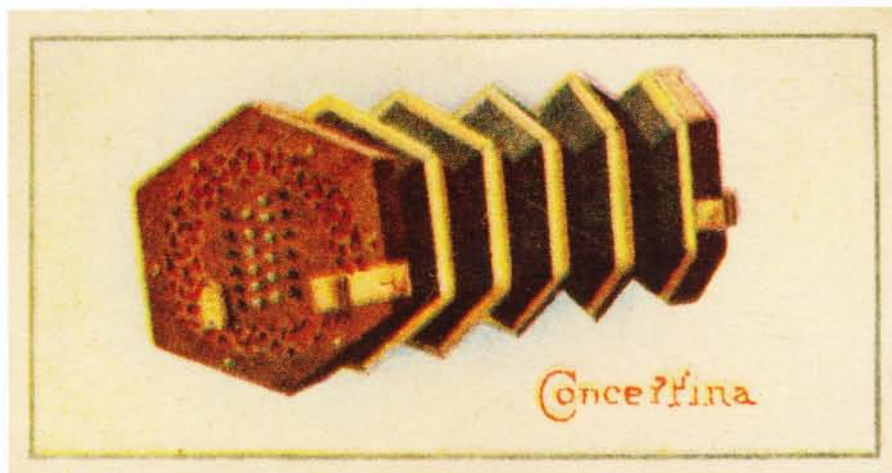


Figure 4. Cigarette card of the 'Concertina' by CWS, number 41 of their set of 48 'Musical Instruments' issued in 1934.

'yours truly', hinting at the lighter nature of his repertoire. Prince was highly rated as a musician in the first quarter of the 20th century and appears to have been sponsored, at least in part, by the Lachenal firm who supplied him with massive instruments using the difficult Maccann duet system. Some of his performances survive on early 78rpm records including 'Catch Me If You Can',

'Chicago Schottische', 'Jackanapes Polka', 'Silver Heels', 'Bluebells of Scotland', 'Henry's Barn Dance', 'Woodland Flowers', 'I'm Going Back to Dixie' and, perhaps most appropriately, Irving Berlin's 'Alexander's Ragtime Band'.

Brass bands were hugely popular in the north of England and it is perhaps not surprising that special concertina bands also grew up. Some were quite



Figure 5. Another cigarette card of the 'Concertina', this one by Edwards, Ringer & Bigg, number 5 of their first series of 'Musical Instruments' issued in 1924.



Figure 6. Printed promotional postcard for the blind musician George Young, published by Hines of Sunderland, undated but c.1930. Not postally used.



Figure 7. Another promotional postcard for Alexander Prince, sponsored by the manufacturers Lachenal & Co, undated but c.1920. Not postally used.



Figure 8. Sepia postcard of an anonymous English concertina band, undated but c.1905-10. Not postally used.



Figure 9. Printed advertising postcard for 'The Premier English Concertina Band', sponsored by the instrument manufacturers Lachenal & Co, undated but c.1910-20. Not postally used.

small (figure 8) but larger bands acted as a sort of social club, even purchasing instruments for the poorest members to play. In the same way that Lachenal sponsored Alexander Prince, they also promoted the Premier English Concertina Band (figure 9), notable for its inclusion of a harp amongst the squeezeboxes. Concertina band music is now virtually unknown but arrangements have survived and some pieces have been recreated using original instruments. They sound spectacular and to see and hear a band on the march must have been quite an experience.

The concertina was also a popular

instrument in the music halls with several speciality acts (figures 10 and 11). Some performers had instruments made with trick effects or of huge or tiny dimensions. The smallest known has just eight notes, the largest nearly 100. One act featured four girls holding four concertinas linked in a ring. The coordination necessary to control the bellows of two instruments while moving around and pressing the appropriate keys at the same time must have been fiendishly difficult. The instrument was also featured by comic performers, often just as a prop (figure 12).

Strangely enough, with its wide use for popular entertainment, the con-

certina was also accepted in religious circles, particularly within the Salvation Army (figure 13). They commissioned a special Crane-system duet from Lachenal who must have profited greatly from their orders. Many Sally Army bands featured concertinas, particularly supplemented by tambourines (figure 14). Special instruments were made for overseas missionaries fitted with nickel rather than steel reeds to withstand the humidity in tropical climes. One prominent performer was Envoy Worthington who promoted himself as 'the singing pilgrim' (figure 15). The back of this postcard is printed with his words for 'Don't Weep For Me Mamma', noted as being 'Composed for the Army's use. Must not be sung for money making.' The music was available for six stamps, at the time halfpenny for a postcard and one penny for a letter. The Army mentioned is, of course, the Salvation Army, not the military.

Despite all this popularity in Edwardian times, the effects of the Great War and the rise of other forms



Figure 10. Promotional postcard for the music hall performer Ralph Waldo 'Talker, Singer, and Concertinaist', printed by Richardson of Leeds, undated but c.1910-20. The front is overstamp with a contact address and the rear with 'Vacant May 16 & 23rd'. Not postally used.



Figure 11. Postcard advertising St. Malo & Coombs with their novelty act 'Regatta Day', printed by the Imperial Publishing Co of Longton in Staffordshire, not dated but c.1910-20. The reverse has their agent's stamp 'George Aytoun, Dramatic, Variety and Circus Agent'. Not postally used.



Figure 12. Photographic postcard of the comedian Mr. Fred Wright, published by Hartmann. Posted at East Grinstead in April 1909.

of entertainment, particularly radio in the 1920s and films in the 1930s, were to prove almost fatal. The concertina went out of fashion and remained so until the folk revival of the 1970s. Since then the demand for old instruments has returned, along with the need for craftsmen to renovate and repair them. The original Wheatstone firm was acquired by Steve Dickinson from Boosey & Hawkes in 1975 along

with all its tools, jigs and surviving records. He continues to make Wheatstone concertinas of superb quality in Suffolk today. Another current maker of equally fine instruments is Colin Dipper in Wiltshire. There are other small specialists, mostly repairers, and some modern instruments are mass-produced in Italy, although any serious player should look for good quality instruments by

Wheatstone, Lachenal, Jeffries or Crabb, or a new Wheatstone or Dipper.

So what of the instruments themselves? There are three basic types – English, Anglo and Duet. The English concertina as originally invented by Charles Wheatstone is fully chromatic with four rows of buttons on each end and is supported with thumb straps and finger rests. The two centre rows of



Figure 14. Real photographic postcard of the Salvation Army Old Ford Brigade band, inscribed on the reverse with date 1920-21. Postally unused.

Left. Figure 13. Carte-de-visite portrait depicting a Salvation Army couple with tambourine and concertina, photographed by Ward's of Brixton, Battersea and Chelsea. The reverse is inscribed 'Yours Truly, Rosey & John Kitchen, June 2 1896'.



ENVOY WORTHINGTON. The Singing Pilgrim.

Figure 15. Printed promotional postcard for 'Envoy Worthington, The Singing Pilgrim', undated but c.1910-20. The reverse is printed with the words of his song 'Don't Weep For Me Mamma'. Not postally used.

buttons are the natural notes in the key of C and the outer rows have the relative accidentals, or sharps and flats. The same note is produced whether the bellows are pulled or pushed. Early instruments had coloured bone buttons in red, white and black to help the beginner. The notes alternate from side to side, particularly convenient for high speed playing. It is also popular for song accompaniment.

The Anglo or, more correctly, the Anglo-German concertina looks similar but has the buttons arranged in curved rows and is supported using hand straps. The major difference is that each button plays different notes on push and pull, much as the mouth organ uses blow and suck. Each row of buttons has the notes in a particular key, so that two-row instruments with about 30 buttons can be played in two related keys, D and G for example. Some have a third row of accidental notes, the 40 buttons making the instrument fully chromatic, albeit with some difficult fingering. The Anglo has a naturally bouncy character so is popular with dance musicians. It is also particularly in demand for Irish music.

The third type is the duet which, like the English, is fully chromatic and plays the same note on push and pull. The main difference is that the high notes are on the right hand, and the lower notes on the left, enabling piano-like arrangements to be played. Several different layouts of buttons exist including the Maccann system with six rows and the Crane system



Figure 16. An early Wheatstone duet concertina, c.1850-55, with original hexagonal wooden case. (Dreweatt Neate, Bristol)



Figure 17. A cheap and cheerful Lachenal Anglo concertina with wooden ends and twenty bone buttons, probably early 20th century.



Figure 18. A high-quality concertina; a 12-sided Lachenal Edeophone Maccann system duet with special amboyna veneered ends, c.1920-30.

Figure 19. A high-quality octagonal Wheatstone Aeola 56-button English tenor-treble concertina with metal ends and original leather case, made in 1923. (Dreweatt Neate, Bristol)



with five. They are generally considered more difficult to play. Old instruments can be cheaper since there is less demand, except for instruments made by Jeffries, which are the most valuable.

Most of the instruments look superficially similar. A duet concertina by Wheatstone (figure 16) shows all the early characteristics, with hexagonal mahogany ends, coloured bone buttons, green leather bellows with decorative papers, brass reeds and a fitted wooden case. A cheap mass-produced Lachenal Anglo appears superficially similar but is physically smaller (figure 17). A top of the range Wheatstone English system Aeola with optional metal ends to give a brighter tone is shown in figure 19. This is a 56-button tenor-treble concertina, larger in size and hence fitted with extra hand straps. The equivalent high-quality model from Lachenal was the Edeophone, shown here in Maccann duet form with impressive amboyna ends and brown bellows (figure 18). The final illustration (figure 20) shows three very different but good-quality instruments by Wheatstone, all typical of production in the 1915-39 period,

Concertinas can be quite valuable. Cheaper bottom of the range examples with wooden ends and brass reeds can be picked up for £100 or so, but they are likely to be in poor condition, out-of-tune and certainly

not worth consideration for any serious player. A decent middle of the range instrument by Wheatstone or Lachenal, in working order and modern tuning, is unlikely to cost less than £500 and around £1,000 would be needed for a decent one. A top of the range Wheatstone Aeola or Lachenal Edeophone will almost certainly exceed £1,500, significantly more for exceptional instruments. A good Anglo by the highly-regarded maker Jeffries might well fetch around £3,000, so the sky can be the limit.

I am not aware of any good book on the subject and concertinas rarely

merit anything other than passing mention in general books. Those interested in learning more should sit in front of a computer and surf the Internet. There are some fascinating and informative websites, most of which show how little detail can be crammed into a 2,000-word article!

Dick Henrywood is a consultant, author and lecturer, specialising in English pottery and collectors' items. The illustrations are all from his own collection except for two instruments sold by Dreweatt Neate in their collectors' sales held at Bristol.

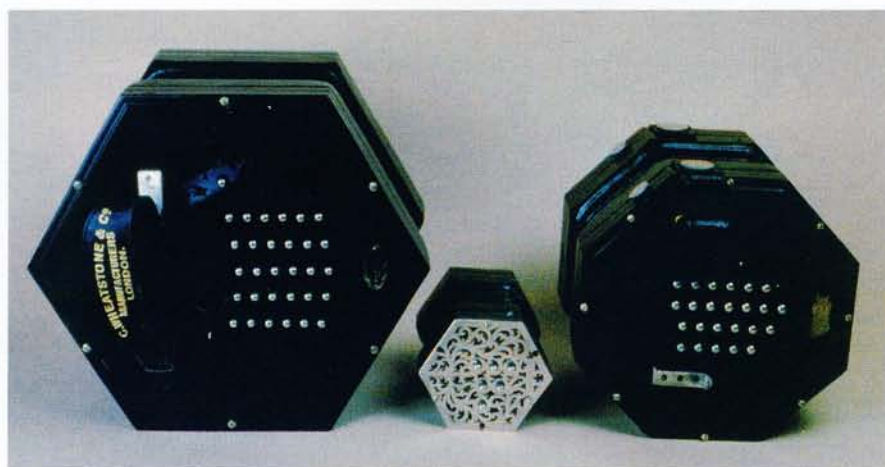


Figure 20. Three good quality Wheatstone concertinas. (Left to right) A Crane system 55-button duet made in 1937; a miniature 12-button English with nickel ends made for the music hall artist Linda Lyveden in 1928; and a standard octagonal Aeola 48-button treble with ebonised ends made in 1917.



THE CONCERTINA: AN ADDENDUM

Dick Henrywood

When I settled down to assemble my recent article 'The Concertina' (*Antique Collecting*, December 2006 / January 2007) I had no idea how popular it would prove. I always thought the social history of the concertina would be an interesting topic for the casual reader, but it obviously stirred a lot of enthusiasm. As a result I thought a small addendum might be of interest to reflect one significant auction result.

But before the excitement let's have a look at another fairly standard instrument that turned up at Dreweatt Neate in Bristol for their Collectors' sale on 28th November last year, too late for inclusion in the original article. This was a normal English model with rosewood ends made late in 1867 (figure 1). The presence of metal buttons, rather than colour-coded bone, and the fact that it was fitted with steel rather than brass reeds, placed this as a better than average instrument for its day. It was also a 56-button model, which was a bonus, although an instrument with only four-fold bellows would be considered inadequate today. In the event, complete with its original wooden case (not illustrated), it sold for a total of £376 against an auction estimate of £300-£400. Remember that an old instrument sold at auction will probably require tuning, which is

expensive, and other refurbishment, so this price, which might initially look a bit low, is probably fair for a middle-of-the-road instrument of such vintage.

On the other hand, a much more desirable Anglo concertina by the maker Charles Jeffries was to turn up at Gorrings in Lewes for their sale on 30th January (figure 2). The original article only referred to Jeffries in passing, noting that 'a good Anglo by the highly-regarded maker Jeffries might well fetch around £3,000, so the sky can be the limit.'

Relatively little is known about Charles Jeffries and his firm. He was born in 1841 and became apprenticed as a brush maker. He is reputed to have played the concertina to attract custom but he started to mend instruments in the mid-1860s and is first noted as a manufacturer in 1869. He had little to do with the other manufacturers and worked at various addresses around Marylebone, particularly in Praed Street, until his death in 1906. The business was continued by two of his sons, one also named Charles, under the style Jeffries Brothers until about 1926, although there is some suggestion that a separate branch continued into the 1930s.

Although one or two very rare and early English system instruments are known and a special duet system was also made, the firm concentrated on

Anglo system instruments and they are widely considered to be the best ever made. Hence the emergence of a good example at auction would inevitably stir a high level of interest. This instrument was typical, with fretted metal ends and the usual Jeffries-style fitted leather case, but could be considered particularly desirable with a total of 46 buttons rather than the more usual 39 or 40. In the event, against a quite modest estimate of £800 to £1,200, it sold for a total, including premium, of £4,140.

Although an extremely high price, this result is not unduly surprising since the demand for these Jeffries Anglos far exceeds supply. At the time of writing, another similar instrument, with 39 rather than 46 buttons and with obvious work required to the bellows, has just sold for £3,100 on eBay. My original comment that a good Jeffries might well fetch around £3,000 was not so far off the mark!

Incidentally, I must confess to one oversight in my original article when I bemoaned the lack of any decent book on the subject. I have quite rightly been taken to task by two readers for missing the fine book by Allan W. Atlas *The Wheatstone English Concertina in Victorian England* (Oxford University Press, 1996). It is an academic study with strong emphasis on 19th century music for the instrument and may be a trifle expensive for casual perusal, but it should be a worthy addition to the bookshelf for any real enthusiast.

Dick Henrywood is a consultant, author and lecturer, specialising in English pottery and collectors' items.



Figure 1. A mid-Victorian Wheatstone 56-button English concertina with rosewood ends, made late in 1867. (Dreweatt Neate, Bristol)



Figure 2. A Charles Jeffries 46-button Anglo concertina with metal ends and original leather case, probably early 20th century. (Gorrings, Lewes)

