The Early Development of Brass Bands, c.1830-1870: Instrumentation and Organisation

Stephen Etheridge

These are a few chronological jottings on the early development of the brass band movement:

In the nineteenth century three things that influenced the spread of brass instruments happened simultaneously. They were the development of new types of brass instruments, a refinement of mechanisation and manufacturing techniques and an increased use of brasswind instruments in bands.[1]From the late eighteenth century there were a number of independent experiments being carried out in different parts of Europe which were aimed at providing brass players with a system that would enable them to play the entire chromatic range on instruments of different sizes and pitches.[2]Early methods of playing chromatically on trumpets employed slides similar to the u-shaped trombone slide system, hand stopping and crooks.[3]A more widely used invention was the keyed bugle. In 1810 the most celebrated English keyed system was patented by Joseph Halliday.[4]It was similar to Austrian inventions for the keyed trumpet, but there is no direct link between Halliday and other inventors.[5] The keyed bugle became popular in both military and amateur wind bands and over the following decades J.H. White argued that some 50 British musical instrument makers produced versions of the instrument. [6]

From the late 1830s the keyed bugle's place was slowly replaced by the cornet-à - pistons. This instrument was introduced into Britain in 1838, when a Dutch instrument, made by Louis Embach of Amsterdam, came into the hands of George McFarlane, a Scottish Infantry bandmaster.[7]The piston valve came to supersede other chromatic systems yet some caution is needed when attributing the growth of the brass band movement to the invention of the piston valve, as before the 1840s valved instruments were no more common in brass bands than keyed instruments.[8]

John Clegg, for example, one of the cotton manufacturers from Besses o' th' Barn, had played the keyed bugle in 1818 with his 'Reed Band'. Besses were to become a 'crack' brass band but at this time the band was composed of two C and F clarinets, piccolo, trumpet (most likely a slide system), two horns, trombone, two bass horns and a bass drum. In 1849 the bugle and the woodwind were replaced by cornets, yet the keyed bugles continued to be made in Germany up to 1866.[9]Hence, the early development of bands was the development of keyed instruments in combination with other types of instruments.[10]

The published music of the period reflected this instrumentation and was aimed at instrumentalists who used the keyed system as much as those who used valves. Thomas Harper published his *Airs*for keyed bugle around 1825, and Tully's *Tutor for Keyed Bugle* was published in 1831 as part of Robert Cocks & Company's Series of Modern Tutors. In 1836, Cocks also published Macfarlane's *Eight Popular Airs for Brass Band*, which is regarded as the first British Publication specifically for brass

bands of sorts.[11]Macfarlane wrote for three keyed bugles on the lead treble parts as opposed to cornopeans, an early version of the valved cornet that was available. In 1836, Blackman and Pace published *The Cornopean Companion of Scales*. It is evident that from surviving publications and instrumental records that cornopeans were in use throughout the country, but it is clear that these valved systems did not usurp the popularity of keyed instruments.[12]The 'dogged' survival of the ophecleide, that was still being used in contests in the 1860s, and the persistent faith of Thomas Harper in the future of the slide trumpet rebuts that notion that technological innovation led to improved musical facility.[13]

The valve, invented no later than 1814, by Heinrich Stölzel and Fredrich Blühmel in Prussia was first applied to the horn and trumpet.[14]Stözal, and others, were making valve instruments of various kinds and although the initial development of these instruments was in Germany and Austria it was largely the French remodelling of these instruments which was imported and copied in Britain.[15]There were a number of variations of valve designs, including the Berlin valve, conceived by Stölzel in 1827, and modified by Wilhelm Wieprecht and Carl Wilhelm Moritz in 1835.[16] The design of valve that was to become universal was that of the Parisian maker Étienne François Périnet in 1839. The cornets made by Courtois and Besson, that were imported from Paris in the mid-1850s, established the model for the standard brass band cornet and had Périnet valves.[17] As Arnold Myers has stated, 'the vast majority of valved brass band instruments made at home or imported from abroad have used them.'[18]

The Spread of the Saxhorn

Saxhorns were a family of valved brass instruments developed by Adolphe Sax at his workshops in Paris in the 1840s and 50s.[19] The name 'saxhorn' became a common description for this family of instruments. Patents for valve brass instruments having names with the 'sax' prefix were registered by him in Paris in 1845, but the validity of some of the patents, at least in so far as they protected a genuine new invention, has been questioned at different times.[20] Ignoring the extreme sizes, which were rarely used, the saxhorn family consisted of: soprano in three-foot F, or three and a quarter-foot E-flat; a contralto in four-foot C, or four and a half foot B-flat; a tenor in six-foot F, or six and a half foot E-flat; a baritone in eight foot C, or a nine-foot B-flat; a bass in eight- foot C or nine-foot B-flat; and contrabasses in twelve-foot F or thirteen foot E-flat (later also in eighteen-foot B-flat).[21]

Saxhorns became well-known in Britain through the performances of the Distin family, soon after their appearance in Paris around 1843.[22] The popularity of their brass performances was a factor that made an unquestionable contribution to the popularisation of saxhorns in Britain and their subsequent establishment as important instruments in the composition of British brass bands.

John Distin had a reputation as a fine trumpet player and together with his four sons (George, Henry, William and Theodore) formed a brass quintet that started touring Britain in 1837.[23] In 1844 the Distins had reached Paris and in the Spring of 1844 Berlioz organised a concert at the *Salle Herz* in Paris. The ensemble that performed consisted of a trumpet, a cornet, a clarinet, a bass clarinet, a saxophone, played by

Sax, and a saxhorn (improved bugle) played by the celebrated Jean Baptiste Arban. John Distin was astonished by the sound of the saxhorn and visited Sax the day after where they borrowed three instruments: a soprano in E-flat, a contralto in B-flat and an alto in E-flat. They also arranged with Sax to be the sole distributors of Saxhorns in Britain.[24] From this point the Distins returned to Britain and went on to tour with a new set of saxhorns.[25] George Distin died in 1848 and the quintet became a quartet and resumed touring a few months after George's death.[26]The Distins toured extensively and by the 1850s had given over 10,000 concerts.[27]The concerts attracted thousands of people and Algernon Rose noted this was because of the musicianship of the ensemble that, as a result, made the saxhorns popular, Rose wrote:

Had the Distin family played loudly and harshly, they would assuredly not have won the new-fangled saxhorns the recognition they did. When properly handled, and when the loudness is kept down, the saxhorn posses many beautiful tone qualities. Their soft playing and ability to make delightful crescendos and diminuendos, were, 'tis said, the chief charms of the performance by the Distins.[28]

Henry Distin acted as agent for Sax for five years until Henry Distin decided that he could profitably make instruments himself, and took over the running of Distin and Co in 1850. In mid-century other instrument manufacturers commenced trading, including: William Brown (From 1851); Ruddall, Rose and Carte & Co. (Already making woodwind, they added brass on joining with Key & Co c.1857). F. Besson (from 1857, though a related firm was making from 1837 in Paris); George Butler (from 1858 as a branch of a Dublin firm) and Riviere and Hawkes, later Hawkes and Son (already repairing, they added manufacture in 1875). Apart from George Butler these makers were based in London and the principal provincial manufacturers were Joseph Higham in Manchester (From 1842) and James Gisbourne in Birmingham from c.1839).[29]

As Evgenia Mitroulia has noted, according to all biographers of Sax, Sax and the Distins ended their collaboration during the London International Exhibition of 1851 because the Distins had started making their own instruments.[30] Between 1851 and 1857 the Distins' design of the saxhorn went through a number of changes and valve types.[31]

The point, however, was that through their popular performances and promotion of the saxhorn the Distins had made the brass ensemble a popular musical choice for entertainment. The Distin family led the way for many bands in Britain that started to use saxhorns almost exclusively. In communities from cities to villages bands began to call themselves 'saxhorn bands'. From mid-century there were also a notable number who called themselves 'saxtuba bands'.[32]From 1896-1897 Enderby Jackson published a series of articles in *Musical Opinion & Musical Trade Review* called 'Origin &Promotion of Brass Band Contests'. These articles cast some light on the early years of the brass band movement in Britain and how the Distin Family influenced its instrumentation. In his first article of the series Jackson writes:

Professional bands up to that period [1844] consisted of keyed Kent bugles (E-flat and B-flat), slide trumpets, French horns, trombones (alto, tenor, and bass),

ophicleides and serpents. The perfection arrived at by the Distin Troupe aroused the interest of the leaders and members of amateur bands, of wealthy mill owners, and of the many supporters of local bands. [...] Markets were quickly found where to procure the most recent make of the new instruments, cornet-à-pistons being secured as the leading instruments. A demand arose for suitable alto Saxhorns, also for basses furnished with the best modern application of the Sax valves or rotary actions; and these necessary instruments were quickly produced, although the alto horns and baritones proved distinctly inferior in purity of tone to the cornets and basses. [...] In a few years almost every village and group of mills in these districts possessed its own band.[33]

Some bands, such as Mossley Brass Band, for example, ordered a full set of Sax Brasses from Henry Distin.[34]The instrumentation of bands in Lancashire and Yorkshire, as well as the well-known Cyfarthfa band, just before 1847, as given by Jackson was the following:

1 bugle in E-flat or D-flat (leading)

1 bugle in B-flat (repiano)

2 bugles in B-flat

1 cornopean in A-flat (solo)

1 second cornopean A-flat

2 trumpets in D-flat

2 French horns in D-flat

1 saxhorn in E-flat (solo)

2 tenor saxhorns in D-flat

1 baritone saxhorn in B-flat

1 alto trombone

2 trombones in B-flat

1 bass trombone

1 euphonion in A-flat

2 bombardons in E-flat

2 or 3 ophicleides[35]

Minor variations occurred due to fluctuating players numbers. According

to Jackson's reports of Sax's models the ones appearing most often in bands of the early contesting era were cornets-à-pistons, alto saxhorns and bass saxhorns.[36]

As the all-brass band developed there were a number of British makers who were capable of producing the instruments needed. The firms of Pace, Percival, Key, Greenhill, Roe, Smith Wigglesworth, Metzler and Sandbach all provided high-quality instruments. The expanding market also absorbed a flood of imported instruments mostly from France and Germany. Compared with the hand-crafted British models many of these instruments were cheap, though some high-quality instruments were sold by Halary and Sax.[37]

Buying Brass Instruments

From the late 1850s the cost of musical instruments began to fall. This was partly due to the removal of protective tariffs through such measures as the Cobden-Chevalier treaty, and partly to increased trade volume and increased levels of competition amongst domestic manufacturers.[38]Cyril Ehrlrich has shown how the price of woodwind and string instruments fell in the second half of the nineteenth-century and a similar picture is reflected for the sale of brass instruments. Dave Russell noted that brass bands were using hire purchase agreements as early as 1855, and that this credit may well have been available earlier.[39]This hire-purchase formed only part of a complex system of cash, cheques, deferred payments and discounted offers. In 1895 Algernon Rose stated that 'the credit system has become the very basis of brass bands. Given a body of steady, industrious young men, the acquirement of a set of first-class instruments is by no means difficult.'[40] Together with the trade in new instruments there was also the availability of second-hand instruments As Trevor Herbert argued, there must have also been a huge market for second-hand instruments as many bands started up and then folded within a few years, and, given the durability of even the cheaper instruments, it is possible many of them stayed in circulation.[41]

Funding for bands came from an eclectic mix of sources. Care needs to be taken when interpreting these sources as industrialists often gave loans or guarantees over total funding, and the 1859 Volunteer Movement came under scrutiny for the amount of money it gave to bands in two parliamentary commissions. On the whole, bands had to rely on their own initiatives to support themselves and care needs to be taken when making sweeping comments about philanthropy.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, most of the instruments for brass bands were made by the larger manufacturers – those that were capable of mass production, such as Boosey, Hawkes, Besson and Higham. Imports of cheap models still continued but included some good quality models such as the Viennese

instruments used by the Cyfarthfa Band, together with the Courtois instruments imported by S.A. Chappell.[42] Makers had a vested interest in promoting their instruments by giving them as contest prizes.[43]In August 1868, for example, Todmorden Old Brass Band, from the West Riding of Yorkshire, hosted a contest and there was a euphonium solo contest in which six players took part. R. Marsden, of Bacup, won the contest and was presented with a euphonium. There was also a solo tenor horn contest and a solo cornet contest where a tenor horn and cornet were prizes.[44]In 1870 the *Preston Guardian* was listing the players that would enter the cornet and euphonium contest at the Preston Brass Band Contest that was to be held on the 30 July.[45] By the 1890s manufacturers regaled the market with ephemera such as band lamps for dark nights, oils to lubricate slides and valves, music stands and other goods on a scale that that had not been known before.[46]Local music retailers became abundant. In 1894 a relatively small community, such as Sowerby Bridge (Pop. 7092 in 1891), possessed two such dealerships while Bradford had no fewer than 46.[47] In addition to technical innovations a combination of promotion techniques, cash and credit methods of payment, affordability and durability of brass instruments all helped standardise the brass band.

Useful evidence survives of the numbers and kinds of instruments being used by the leading bands in the 1860s. Over eighty contest forms are preserved in the Enderby Jackson papers that are currently in the care of Arnold Myers. As Myers argues, 'since only bands reasonably certain of their balance of instruments would enter a contest at the national level, we can assume that the instrumentation of these bands represents the "state of the art" at that time.'[48]The thirty-four surviving Crystal Palace Contest forms show that the average band of eighteen players contained the following:

1-2 sopranos, mostly in D-flat, but also in E-flat

5 cornets, mostly in A-flat, but also in B-flat

0-1 alto saxhorns in A-flat

2-3 tenor saxhorns (or alt-horns), mostly in D-flat, but also in E-flat

1-2 baritones, mostly in A-flat, but also in B-flat

1 tenor trombone, mostly in C, but also in B-flat

1 bass trombone, mostly in G

1-2 ophicleides, mostly in C, but also in B-flat

1 Sax bass or euphonium, mostly in B-flat or A-flat, but also in C

1 contrabass saxhorns or bombardons, mostly in E-flat, but also in D-flat[49]

After the last of Enderby Jackson's Grand National Crystal Palace Contests, in 1863, the annual contest at Belle Vue, in Manchester became the most influential and prestigious. In 1873 there was an incident where a Black Dyke euphonium player played trombone solos on a valve trombone, and, as a result, the contest rules were tightened to avoid this. Present day band instrumentation can said to have moved towards standardisation from this date.[50] It did, however, take some time for the rules of other contests to follow, and, as Arnold Myers argues, the instrumentation of non-contesting bands was never standardised and 'we can safely assume that some small village bands carried on using valve trombones, clarinets and [...] ophicleides throughout the century.'[51]

Nevertheless, by the 1870s, bandsmen had benefited from the technical, manufacturing and retail changes that resulted in brass instruments becoming popular, affordable and durable. The move to a standardised instrumentation had begun and this gave brass bands a secure starting point to create a hobby that was being commented on by middle-class observers.

[1] Arnold Myers, 'Design Technology and Manufacture Since 1800', in Trevor Herbert and John Wallace (Eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Brass Instruments* (Cambridge,1997, online edition 20011), p. 115.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521563437> , accessed 10 October, 2014

[2] Herbert, 'Making a Movement', p. 25.

[3] See, Arnold Myers, *Brass Instruments: Their History and Development* (London, 1976, this edition, 1980), pp. 178-190.

[4] Myers, *Brass Instruments*, p. 194.

[5] Herbert, 'Making a Movement, p. 27.

[6] J. H. White, *A Short History of Bramley Band* (Bramley, 1906), p. 26.

[7] White, *A Short History*, p. 47.

[8] Herbert, 'Making a Movement', p. 27.

[9] Myers, *Brass Instruments*, pp.196-197.

[10] Herbert, 'Making a Movement', p. 27.

[11] Herbert, 'Making a Movement', p. 27.

[12] Herbert, 'Making a Movement', p. 27.

[13] Herbert, 'Making a Movement', p. 28.

[14] Arnold Myers, 'Instruments and Instrumentation of British Brass Bands', in, Herbert, *Making a Movement*, p. 161.

[15] Myers, 'Instruments and Instrumentation, p. 161.

[16] Myers, 'Instruments and Instrumentation, p. 166.

[17] Myers, 'Instruments and Instrumentation', p. 167.

[18] Myers, 'Instruments and Instrumentation'. P. 167.

[19] Philip Bate, Trevor Herbert and Arnold Myers, 'Saxhorn.' *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online.* Oxford University Press. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/24667>, accessed 4 October, 2014.

[20] See, Evgenia Mitroulia, *Adolphe Sax's Brasswind Production With a Focus on Saxhorns and Related Instruments* (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2011)

[21] Arnold Myers, 'Instruments and Instrumentation of British Brass Bands', in Herbert, (Ed) *The British Brass Band*, p. 169

[22]Mitroulia, *Adolphe Sax's Brasswind Production,* p. 237.

[23] 'Provincial Concerts', *Musical World Volume* 6, number 66 (16 June, 1837, p. 14, cited in, Mitroulia, *Adolphe Sax's Brasswind Production,* p. 237.)

[24] Ray Farr, *The Distin Family Legacy: The Rise of the Brass Band in 19th Century Britain*(Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, 2013), p. 119.

[25] Mitroulia, *Adolphe Sax's Brasswind Production,* pp. 237-239

[26] Mitroulia, *Adolphe Sax's Brasswind Production,* p. 238.

[27] Farr, *The Distin Family Legacy* p. 42

[28] Algernon S. Rose, *Talks With Bandsmen: A Popular Handbook for Brass Instrumentalists*(London, 1895), p. 227.

[29] Myers, 'Instruments and Instrumentation of British Brass Bands' p. 171.

[30] Mitroulia, *Adolphe Sax's Brasswind Production,* p. 246.

[31] See Mitroulia, *Adolphe Sax's Brasswind Production,* p. 253.

[32] Mitroulia, *Adolphe Sax's Brasswind Production,* p. 263.

[33] Enderby Jackson, 'Origin & Promotion of Brass Band Contests',*Musical Opinion and Music Trade Review*, Volume19, number. 222 (March 1896), p. 392, cited in, Mitroulia, *Adolphe Sax's Brasswind Production,* p. 263

[34] Jackson, 'Origin and Promotion of Brass Band Contests.' p. 392.

[35] Jackson, 'Origin and Promotion of Brass Band Contests 'Volume 20 no. 234 (March 1897), p 235.

[36] Jackson, 'Origin and Promotion of Brass Band Contests Volume 20, no. 230 (November 1896), p.102.

[37] Myers, 'Instruments and Instrumentation of British Brass Bands' pp. 170-171

[38]Herbert, 'Making A Movement', p. 43.

[39] David Russell, *The Popular Music Societies of the Yorkshire Textile District, 1850-1914: A Study of the Relationships between Music and Society* (PhD Thesis, University of York, 1979), p. 38.

[40] Rose, *Talks With Bandsmen*, p. 305.

[41]Herbert, 'Making A Movement', p. 43.

[42] Myers, 'Instruments and Instrumentation of British Brass Bands', p. 176.

[43] Myers, 'Instruments and Instrumentation of British Brass Bands', p. 176

[44] *Huddersfield and West Yorkshire Advertiser* (8 August, 1868)

[45] *Preston Guardian* (30 July, 1870)

[46] Russell, *The Popular Music Societies of the Yorkshire Textile District, 1850-1914*, p. 138.

[47] Russell, *The Popular Music Societies of the Yorkshire Textile District, 1850-1914*, p. 138

[48] Myers, 'Instruments and Instrumentation of British Brass Bands' p. 171.

[49] Myers, 'Instruments and Instrumentation of British Brass Bands' p. 172.

[50] Myers, ‘Instruments and Instrumentation of British Brass Bands’ p. 173.

[51] Myers, ‘Instruments and Instrumentation of British Brass Bands’ p. 173.