

THE BESSON STORY

As one of the famous brands in brass bands celebrates its 180th anniversary with the launch of a new look for its iconic instruments, Besson Artist, Steven Mead, looks back over the remarkable history of the France-based manufacturer



At the beginning of the 19th century, the manufacture of band instruments was little more than a cottage industry. Individual craftsmen made such items as keyed bugles, serpents and ophicleides, most of them from materials other than brass. At that time, a business was founded in Paris and subsequently established in London, which was destined to become famous throughout the world for the excellence of its brass instruments and whose name, so easily pronounced in all tongues, became synonymous with its product. This famous name is Besson.



Gustave Auguste Besson was a genius in the science of acoustics who, in 1837 at the age of 18, produced and registered a new model cornet, which was universally recognised as a revolutionary development superseding all previous instruments of its kind. The immediate success was tremendous and formed the prelude to a lifetime of work, during which over 50 inventions relevant to wind instruments were accredited to him and patented. His products became famous in Europe and, in 1857, he moved to England where the vigour of brass bands' popularity was already evident.



From a large factory in London, Besson instruments not only captured a major part of the British market, but were also exported to many countries. Impressive orders came from the USA, where band instrument manufacture was in its infancy, reaching a volume of over 2,000 instruments annually. The unique character of the business attracted visits from the British Royal Family, as well as many foreign dignitaries and other eminent personages. Instruments for special artists were elaborately engraved and the bells of some cornets for use in Czarist Russia were even studded with semi-precious stones. The firm had been entrusted with a contract for the bands of the Japanese Navy, whose ships came at intervals to English ports to collect the merchandise. Such is the fame of Besson! In the enthusiastic climate of band

contesting, the high quality of Besson products became, and remains, a legend to this day.

During the following years, under the control of Besson's daughter, an astute and colourful character who became a familiar figure in the brass band fraternity, the business rode on the crest of the wave, through the 'gay 90s' into the 20th century. Amid a vastly changed musical scene and the increasing complexity of marketing methods of the post war era, Besson merged its considerable forces with Boosey and Hawkes in 1948.

Another great influencer of wind instrument design was Adolphe Sax. Believed by many to be the greatest of all musical instrument innovators, he was born in Belgium and moved to Paris in 1839. A celebrated performer as well as a renowned inventor of both woodwind and brass instruments, Sax left much of value to the world of music. Not least of his achievements was the invention of the Saxhorn, the principle of which still prevails in the modern tuba and euphonium. Influenced largely by Henry Distin, a virtuoso of his day and a close confidant of Sax, Saxhorns became predominant in the UK and, in fact, brass bands were modelled upon Sax's Paris band, which was remarkably similar in content to the current standard 'British' brass band. As the English agent for Sax and a brilliant exponent, Distin did much to promote the brass band movement and worked closely with Boosey and Co., with which he merged in 1868.

In parallel with the growth of brass band popularity, Boosey and Co. engaged in a great deal of rewarding research, the high point being reached in 1874 when D.J. Blakely invented his famous compensating system, which is still a feature of the finest modern baritones, euphoniums and tubas. Their consequent merger in 1930 with Hawkes and Son gave rise to the giant of the music industry, Boosey and Hawkes, which eventually



also encompassed Besson. With cutting-edge design and manufacture, Besson became the leading brand of euphoniums, cornets, tenor horns, baritones and tubas. Extensive research enabled the company to produce the best brass instruments available. That research always involved collaborating with the finest players of the day, both from the brass band world, many of whose members would travel to the factory in Edgware, north London, and leading orchestral players such as the legendary Denis Wick and John Fletcher. Working with leading players has always been essential to the development of this famous brand and it still continues today.

Many of the leading brass bands from the 1930s to the present day have also trusted their performance to Besson instruments, and the legendary sound of the country's finest brass bands through the decades has been one of the best exports for the brass band genre around the world. Within the contesting brass band world, and with Salvation Army bands, the Besson brand became totally dominant and the instruments highly sought-after. Instruments were given the separate brand names, which are now legendary names in the brass band world: Regent, Westminster, New Standard, Imperial and, later, Sovereign (from 1971) and more recently Prestige (from 1999) are indeed iconic names that are part of this incredible 180-year tradition and sewn into the fabric of brass band history.

For over 150 years, famous soloists have trusted their reputation to Besson brass Instruments. By joining the Buffet Crampon Group in 2006, Besson restructured and launched its production of professional instruments in Germany and France. Buffet Crampon applies all of its technical, acoustic, organisational and marketing talent, as well as its international distribution network, to the Besson brand. Besson is more than ever the brand of champions with its leading position in brass bands. With great pride, several of the country's leading performers and teachers visit the factory each month to test and help develop further these famous instruments. The quest for ever better quality is still as dynamic today as it was nearly two centuries ago. Besson today, lives up to its pedigree; in simple terms, the sound is superb!

