

Introduction and Summary

German and Anglo-German concertinas experienced an astonishing period of popularity throughout much of the world from the early 1850s through about 1910. By far the most popular types of concertina, they were played by a wide array of working and middle class people in both rural and urban settings, as well as by various indigenous peoples who lived in areas of European expansion. Their primary use came in playing for new dance fashions that emanated from nineteenth century European ballrooms, including quadrilles, polkas, waltzes, schottisches, galops and the like. The instruments were used for dances in houses, barns and community halls in rural Ireland and England, the Australian and New Zealand bush, the South African veldt, and the American prairie. They were also used to accompany singing of both hymns and secular music by London street musicians, the Salvation Army, performers in music halls and minstrel shows, and by sailors at sea.

The prototype of what later became known as the German concertina was invented by Carl Uhlig of Chemnitz, Saxony in 1834. This type of concertina became one of the first widely available, inexpensive, mass-produced consumer luxury items, a by-product of the rise of factory production and global trade. Although quickly supplanted within Germany by evolving, increasingly larger free-reed instruments, Uhlig's small one-, two-, and later three-row models caught on with working-class people around the world. English craftsmen copied its keyboard and improved on its mechanical parts (using technology borrowed from the Wheatstone English-system concertina) and, in doing so, created the closely related Anglo-German concertina, the name of which is today typically

shortened to "the Anglo". German and Anglo-German instruments spread quickly from Germany and England to distributors and shopkeepers in Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and North America. British and American sailors used them extensively at sea and spread the instruments, as well as the latest fashions in dance music, to all of their ports of call. Traders, missionaries, sailors, soldiers, and colonists introduced German concertinas to indigenous people in Africa, Australasia and North America.

Widely adopted for playing popular dance music and song tunes of the day, these instruments have an easy-to-learn diatonic 'push-and-pull' keyboard which gives music a natural bounce and drive. German and Anglo-German concertinas far surpassed in numbers and cultural impact their more elite cousin, the English concertina, and in a time well before the guitar was particularly popular, German and Anglo-German concertinas became favorite instruments in global popular culture. In a world before recorded music, radio, and television, the German concertina served as a combination home phonograph, piano, and juke-box among those of limited means or with limited access to the music of theatres and concert halls.

After a heyday that extended from the 1850s until the early twentieth century, German and Anglo-German concertinas were largely forgotten. By 1950, their last remaining players consisted of a few dozen musicians in rural County Clare Ireland, a few individuals in rural England, a few aging musicians in remote parts of the Australian bush, and a slightly more numerous playing population among Boer farmers and Zulu and Sotho migrant workers in South Africa. In recent years, usage of the concertina has significantly

rebounded and it has again become a truly global instrument.

Most of us who play the Anglo-German concertina today came to it by way of the great revival of interest in traditional music that has swept the globe in the last few decades—not by inheritance from an older family member or directly from a tradition of older players in our cities and towns. Because of the long middle-twentieth-century gap in the concertina's playing history, most of us know little about those who played them before our time, where and how they were played, and for what purposes. These two volumes are, in part, an attempt to fill in some of those gaps in our knowledge.

This book examines three aspects of German and Anglo-German concertinas: their history, including the processes of invention, manufacture, and marketing; a social history of those people around the world who played them; and an analysis of the evolution in styles and techniques of those who played these instruments from the late nineteenth century to the present. This report relies mostly upon primary sources—observations of their use taken from period newspapers, journals, diaries and books. Such first-hand observations have been difficult to gather in the past, but are readily available to the researcher today by means of digital search engines on the Internet as well as the digital archives of research libraries. Each “sighting” is merely an anecdote, but when combined and analyzed by the hundreds and thousands, a more coherent global picture emerges.

The social world of German and Anglo-German concertinas

The results of such searches, focused upon the occurrence of an inexpensive working-class instrument distributed widely around the world, offer a unique snapshot of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular music and dance

and, indeed, of life in general at that time. The Victorian era represented the high water mark of the British Empire, when colonies expanded rapidly into formerly native lands. Many indigenous people of the nineteenth century world were at the tip of the spear of European expansion, and missionaries, soldiers and colonists (in America, ex-colonists) were the agents of that expansion. Both colonizers and the colonized played the concertina. With the colonists, it was a link to the latest popular dance fashions and songs from Europe and, increasingly, from America. Among indigenous people, playing the concertina was at times part of acculturation, voluntary or forced, and at other times became a wildly creative experiment in the use of a new, foreign instrument in a completely non-European musical context.

The concertina's heyday coincided with a worldwide nineteenth-century boom in European ballroom-style dancing—quadrilles, polkas, waltzes, schottisches, varsovianas and the like. The concertina played a large role in the composition and dispersal of the music for these dances in colonial Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (especially among the Boers), as well as in England and Ireland. The pattern of concertina use for these dances was remarkably similar in each of these places. In rural areas, house or barn dances were the typical venues, and the concertina was often played solo for them, or perhaps was played along with an additional concertina or fiddle. New dances, most of which originated in continental Europe, migrated directly to each country. The bands of British military garrisons typically played a key role in introducing the latest dance and its dance rhythm, and the news spread quite rapidly to the most rural of areas. No part of the then-British Empire was too remote for these enormously popular and global ballroom dances, from the outback of Australia to the African veldt to the most

conservative parts of Gaelic western Ireland.

Equally global in its penetration was the minstrel music craze that emanated from the United States in the nineteenth century. Minstrel troupes, frequently in blackface, were highly popular in England, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and in the former British Cape Colony and Boer Republics of present-day South Africa. After the genre's initial introduction in each country by visiting American groups, new troupes were generated locally. The German concertina and the banjo were key instruments of this genre, and use of the banjo in popular and traditional music in all of these countries dates back to the days of the minstrel shows. The musical legacy of the minstrels includes significant parts of local repertoires of traditional dance music and song today. For example, the minstrel-composed tune *The Miller's Reel* has become the traditional Irish reel *The Dawn*. Cecil Sharp noted the English morris dance tune *Getting Upstairs* from Oxfordshire concertina player William Kimber, not knowing that it had originally been composed by an American for the minstrel shows. Such globally shared minstrel music as well as shared ballroom dance tunes demonstrate the existence of a vibrant and global late nineteenth century pop culture. The mass-produced, globally marketed German concertina and button accordion (not to mention the banjo) played a musical role within this pop culture that was similar to that of the ubiquitous electric guitar today.

In Britain, the late nineteenth century was not a period of prosperity for working-class people at home, regardless of the expansion of the Empire. A pronounced drop in agricultural prices, caused by the low cost of imported North American grain and the development of more effective agricultural methods, caused a major and prolonged exodus of farm laborers from greatly impoverished rural areas. A small part of that exodus involved the departure to the cities of

village professional and amateur musicians. Adoption of the inexpensive German concertina was one means by which remaining, musically unlettered rural people continued to make music, and the instrument gained a prominent role in traditional rural English social life—it was used in morris dance, mumming, social dancing, and church music. As migrating former farm workers arrived in English cities by the hundreds of thousands, many remained unemployed and were forced into the world of the street, so well described by Charles Dickens. The German concertina became a vibrant part of the ensuing much-loved and much-despised parade of London street music, as thousands sought to make a living by busking or by begging.

Neighboring Ireland had just emerged from the tragic years of the Great Famine, and most of its rural people would remain in poverty for many years. The process of migration of musicians out of rural areas experienced in Britain was magnified in Ireland, where most rural migrants left the country altogether. Music collector Francis O'Neill remarked upon the emptiness of the Irish countryside with respect to the old professional class of fiddlers and pipers, many of whom became his immigrant musical sources in urban America. The inexpensive German concertina became popular at that time all over Ireland, and many observers remarked upon its presence in nearly every rural household, as rural people began to make their own instrumental music to a greater extent than ever before. The afore-mentioned continental European ballroom dance craze penetrated deep into the Irish countryside, with the German concertina often comprising the sole music for house dances that consisted of polkas, waltzes, and "sets" (quadrilles) in addition to native jigs and reels. The great attraction of these new ballroom dances in Ireland and elsewhere was that dancers were in couples, often facing each other with arms around

waists, in dances that often lasted most of the night—heady stuff for the young of that era. The concertina and the banjo both drew the ire of Gaelic nationalists as “foreign” instruments that brought “foreign” dances into the last bastions of Gaelic culture. At the same time, the concertina was frequently used in various acts of political protest against the ongoing forces of British occupation, in both rural areas and in cities.

Existing histories of Sir Charles Wheatstone's English-system concertina describe the world of genteel Victorian music salons and concert halls. In contrast, the history of the German and Anglo-German concertina is that of the working men and women upon whose backs that world was built—soldiers, sailors, missionaries, miners, ranchers, farmers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, Salvation Army workers, immigrants, the homeless on the street, and of course various native peoples. The Victorian world was one of sharply drawn class structure, and many first-hand accounts of German concertina use in England and America were written by a social elite that despised nearly every tune produced by it. Many if not most in the social elite as well as in the popular press that courted their approval accepted no other musical standard than that of western classical music, and the extremely popular German concertina bore the brunt of their invectives. It was only by the efforts of the various folk music revivals, starting largely with that begun by England's Cecil Sharp in the early twentieth century, that the elite learned to think more expansively about music. The first and most widely remembered of Cecil Sharp's many musical sources played the Anglo-German concertina.

The evolution of playing styles and techniques

The appropriateness of various types of ornamentation or the turn of a particular musical phrase provide topics of endless discussion for

many involved in playing for traditional Irish and English folk music on the concertina today. It seems appropriate to review the evolution of styles and techniques of playing this instrument, both to see what has been deemed beautiful or appropriate by past generations and to see how and why these styles and techniques have evolved. A series of twenty-eight note-for-note transcriptions were made from early recordings of those who learned to play German and Anglo-German concertinas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Chapter 10). These transcriptions represent the playing of former musicians from England, Ireland, Australia, and South Africa; sadly, no recordings appear to have been made of Anglo-German concertina players of North America and New Zealand during that time frame, nor were any sailors recorded playing this most nautical of instruments. These transcriptions, as well as available period documents such as printed tutors and interviews with older players, show a remarkable evolution in playing styles in all of these countries since the late nineteenth century. These changes were driven primarily by concurrent dramatic, global-scale changes in music and dance fashions.

Late nineteenth and earliest twentieth century playing techniques used by dance musicians in these four countries seem to have been remarkably similar. Tunes were played predominately in the key of C on instruments pitched in C and G, and the earliest players who were recorded almost universally used an octave technique (two notes played at once, an octave apart) throughout most of each piece played, with minimal other ornamentation. This style of playing was remarkably well suited to playing for ballroom dances in houses, barns, and wool sheds, where the noise level was high and where the dances lasted all night—a daunting task for any concertina player, as that player often played alone. Dancers demanded a clean beat that was

easily heard, and the paying dancers usually got what they wanted. Although chording seems to have been uncommon in Australia and Ireland, England's William Kimber would add a third interval note to the lower octave note, making a partial chord on the left hand, whereas in South Africa players like Hans Bodenstein and Chris Chomse would add a similar third interval note, but to the right hand. These simple harmonic additions were done in ways that were easy to play, and added to the strength of the beat. During this period concertina playing reached its global zenith in popularity.

And then the worm turned. Out of America's melting pots came strikingly new music and dances: the age of ragtime, blues, and jazz had begun. Richly chromatic, this new music contained notes not available on the diatonic two-row German and Anglo-German concertinas that were owned by the majority of players. At the same time, once popular European ballroom dances gave way to a rapid succession of two-steps, the fox trot, the Black Bottom, and the Charleston. Ballroom dances and the concertina, with their closely symbiotic relationship, rapidly waned. For those players who stuck with the instrument, change came to the concertina in two distinct waves. The first wave consisted of playing in larger bands for larger dances in larger public spaces; the second involved moving beyond playing for dances.

In Ireland, these global changes were partly preceded by the formation of the Irish State. In the nationalistic fervor that accompanied that process, the Gaelic League sought to replace ballroom dancing and newer, yet more sinister forms of terpsichorean cultural decline with figure dances from Kerry in newly designed céilí evenings. As that movement grew, the young Irish government enacted legislation for the licensing of public dances that effectively moved dances from country houses and crossroads, where they

had been since time immemorial, to public dance halls. The result was the formation of céilí bands, which were to change the playing of music from a solo fiddle or concertina player for a house dance to one where a larger group of musicians was needed to play for a dance in a large public hall. The old octave playing in the key of C largely ceased, as concertina players now found themselves playing in the keys of G and D, and occasionally A and F, used by others in the band—fiddlers, pipers, accordions, and flutes. To accommodate playing in some of these additional keys, the once-ubiquitous German two-row concertina had to be replaced by a more expensive three-row instrument. These changes, as well as the concurrent arrival of the gramophone, decimated the numbers of concertina players around the country. A newer, smaller group of remaining concertina players, many with improved Anglo-German instruments, now switched to playing in single-note, along-the-row styles, better for playing in these keys. The larger music world in Ireland was split between those who went with the céilís, and those who went modern to the jazz age and beyond. The concertina stayed only with the former, but in much reduced numbers. Its time had come and gone.

In South Africa, the new twentieth century came with ever-growing towns and a more settled landscape after the tumultuous and tragic years of the Boer Wars. As in Ireland, dances generally moved from houses to larger public spaces in these towns, and those larger dance venues required bands rather than solo players. In contrast to the situation in Ireland, the concertina retained its place of primacy among the Boer folk. It became the lead melody instrument in the new dance bands, and other additions (guitars, string bass, drums) existed only to add rhythmic volume. Here the new global chromatic music was welcomed rather than rejected. Concertina players

met the challenge of this new music by dropping their old two-row German instruments and buying expanded-keyboard Wheatstone concertinas of thirty-eight and more keys, the better to play chromatically. As the twentieth century progressed, octave playing was increasingly replaced by heightened use of rhythmic and complex chords, as well as by complex forms of cross-row fingering. The 1920s to the 1940s marked the high point of the concertina-led dance bands of the Boer.

In Australia, New Zealand, America, and England, this was a time of disappearance and near-extinction of concertina playing, as few players successfully met the challenge imparted by new music and dance fashions. House dances continued only in remote parts of rural Australia, with the last remnants discovered in the middle twentieth century by collectors of the folk revival. By the middle of the twentieth century, only a few aging stragglers remained active in both Australia and England.

The second wave of twentieth-century change in concertina playing began with the emerging global revival in folk and traditional music that arguably began in Greenwich Village in New York in the 1950s and then spread rapidly to Britain and its former colonies. As the folk movement picked up steam in England, a global concertina “revival” began there. Concertinas were prominently used in a second revival of morris dancing, and by the 1970s they were part of a renewal of rural English dance music. In Australia, folk music collector John Meredith and others who followed in his footsteps recorded the aging survivors of the rural house and barn dances (now termed “bush” dances). In Ireland, interest quickly grew in what was now called “traditional” music and dance. Irish dances in revival activities included the “foreign” set dances and polkas formerly reviled by the Gaelic League, and it now became acceptable to include the once-rejected

banjo and concertina in official Irish traditional music circles. Fortunately, County Clare still had a small population of surviving concertina players to help guide younger players.

This late twentieth-century global traditional music revival had one very clean and abrupt break with the past, however. In England, Ireland, and Boer South Africa, revival concertina playing became focused primarily on making music for *listening* rather than dancing, as the vast majority of the dancing public had long since left behind the old dances (including both nineteenth-century European ballroom styles as well as older forms) for twentieth-century dance fashions from the United States and from Latin America. Most revival concertina players inhabit pub sessions, competitions and festivals, and do not typically play for old-style house or other social dances (although some in England play for the morris, a ritual dance). This change has had a profound effect on the way the instrument is played. Three distinct new “listening-oriented” playing styles have emerged in this second wave, each more complex in its techniques than that of a preceding generation of players. In Ireland, the effect of competitions and the new focus on listening met its new master in Clare concertina player Paddy Murphy, who added rich new ornamentation borrowed from other instruments as well as alternative scales to iron out phrasing issues, thereby elevating the instrument to a new level. His disciples, Noel Hill chief among them, spread and expanded this new musical gospel, which by now only superficially resembles the simple octave playing of those concertinists of two generations earlier. This new style of richly ornamented playing has become a global phenomenon, taking Irish concertina music well beyond the borders of Ireland.

In England, the last few of the old players had passed away before much was done to record them. In the general absence of living exponents

of traditional styles, a new generation listened to the few recordings of William Kimber (d. 1961), as well as to English melodeon music, and developed a second highly innovative style of concertina playing. It consists of melodeon-like oom-pah chords on the left hand that are completely separated from the movements of the right hand, which plays melody. This style is quite unlike that of Kimber, who never traveled far from his octave roots where the two hands move in parallel. Pushing this new way of playing to the extreme, many English revival players acquired G/D concertinas, the better to play in that style with string musicians. Although not all Anglo-German concertinists in England play in this manner, enough do that the new genre is sometimes termed “English-style Anglo playing.”

Finally, in South Africa, yet a third new style has developed. Intensely chromatic, it features a great degree of smooth fluidity in phrasing, gained by playing complete phrases—and sometimes even entire pieces—in one direction of the bellows. Boers use their multi-row, extended-keyboard Wheatstone Anglo-German concertinas to play not only the Boer dance classics of yesteryear, but modern songs and dance tunes from global popular music. Complex chords and chromatic passages are commonplace. Of all the current concertina dialects worldwide, the Boers have embraced musical modernity to the fullest extent. As is the case in Ireland and England, however, this new style graces sessions, festival concerts, and CDs much more often than it does the dance floor.

Inevitably, there has been a reaction to the relative disappearance of dance. The old schottisches, quadrille tunes and polkas are fine to listen to, but for many the feet were made to do more than toe-tap. In Australia, a significant movement to bring back the old “bush” ballroom dances has sprung up, with a small parallel movement to revive the Anglo concertina there.

Early efforts in the 1980s were modernist in allowing electric guitars and the like, but bush groups today increasingly tend to tone down to a smaller and gentler acoustic scale more in keeping with old rural practice. In South Africa, recent years have seen an interesting counter-movement among some players away from the highly modern, fluid, and stylized technique on extended keyboard Anglo-German concertinas, back to the old two-row German-style *boerekonsertina*. No such fully “retro” concertina movement has yet arisen in Ireland and England.

Regardless of such splinter movements, the three new modernist revival styles are very much in the ascendancy, the Irish style chief amongst them. Largely as a result, the Anglo-German concertina is experiencing a marked rise in global popularity after having successfully acclimated itself to a new, radically different twenty-first century cultural setting. A plethora of new concertina builders, repairers, websites and supporting organizations have developed around the globe in the last three decades. The future of the Anglo concertina, once very much in question, now seems bright.

The roughness of the nineteenth-century world: some caveats

The Anglo-German concertina was revived and reborn in the late twentieth century largely as a middle class “folk” instrument. Those today who typically encounter fellow Anglo concertina players in weekend music workshops in bucolic settings may be a bit shocked to see it and its German concertina cousin in their former habitat. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, these were predominantly working class instruments in an exceedingly rough Victorian world—a world that was shaped by severe class distinctions, ideologies of empire-building, and racial stereotyping. Quotations from firsthand period accounts used throughout this narrative

reflect this world, and some of them contain terms and attitudes concerning class and race that are unacceptable today, regardless of how they were intended at the time. Those accounts, however flawed, are important guides to the concertina's use during that era.

The concertina's use in blackface minstrelsy—a form of entertainment that was popular in the nineteenth century in every country where the concertina was prominent—involved edgy and typically racist lyrics and skits. Some descriptions written by early explorers and settlers about musical encounters with various indigenous people are either racially charged or thoughtlessly condescending. In Britain and in America, descriptions penned by the social elite and the Victorian press about working class concertina players are often condescending and in some cases inflammatory.

At the same time, there is much of beauty in the majority of firsthand accounts of the concertina's use by the strong and resilient people who played it. These include a description of

some rather shy young people enjoying a cross-roads dance in County Mayo, Ireland, and a description of a group of ex-slaves dancing at sunset on the open prairie in coastal Texas—celebrating their new freedom. They also include a charming account of Maoris and New Zealand colonists sharing a Christmas dance on a remote offshore island, as well as a description of Christmas house dances in rural Cornwall. Of Boer farm families dancing on the dirt floor of a small house, stopping frequently to water down the choking dust that rose from the floor. Of just-landed Australian immigrants playing for an impromptu dance near their tents along the shore, and of an English morris team dancing in the snow. Of groups of Zulu and Sotho migrant workers in long treks from their homelands to South African gold mines, playing the concertina to help set the rhythm and ease their passage. Of a sailor lying on the deck of a full rigged ship, his day's work done, playing his concertina and singing to the stars.

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