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Development of the Brass Band Movement in  
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RAYMOND KENNETH FARR

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**The Distin Family and its Influence on the Development  
of the Brass Band Movement in Nineteenth-Century  
Britain**

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**MA by Research**

**Department of Music  
Durham University**

**April 2012**

**Volume One: Chapters 1-9 and bibliography**

## ABSTRACT

# **The Distin Family and its Influence on the Development of the Brass Band Movement in Nineteenth-Century Britain.**

Ray Farr

This dissertation examines the influence of the Distin Family brass ensemble on the developing brass band movement in nineteenth-century Britain. As well as drawing critically on previous research - e.g., Herbert (1991), Myers (1991), Newsome (1998), Jones (1995), Taylor (1979), Russell (1997) and Scott (1970) - the thesis re-examines and re-interprets the significance of the Distins in the light of new empirical and archival research carried out as part of this project. The focus of the research is on the significance of the Distins' contribution to the following important aspects of the historical development of brass bands: brass performance practice, repertory, publishing, contesting, and the technical and technological development of instrument design and manufacturing. The claim is made that the importance of the Distins lies in the extent of their artistic ambitions, their capacity for genuine innovation, and their tireless business acumen and entrepreneurship.

Throughout the nineteenth century the brass band movement emerged as part of the larger processes of social, cultural and political change, and the rapid progress of industrialization. These changes manifested themselves also in the brass band world, most significantly through the introduction of valved instruments (particularly the saxhorn), the rise of mass production and new markets, and the gradual increase in leisure time and a relative improvement in social conditions. This dissertation argues that what distinguished the Distins in this historical context was their capacity to recognise opportunities, both artistic and commercial, and through their entrepreneurship to play the leading role in the establishment of the brass band movement in its modern form.

The discovery of new material in the course of the research for this project challenges established views, ideas and conceptions of the evolution of brass bands and their repertory. Particularly relevant in showing the importance of the Distins to brass bands are the documented newspaper and magazine reports from an estimated 10,000 performances during their concert tours around the world, many of which are referred to and included in this study. It was therefore also in part due to their fame as performers that the Distins were able to wield such influence, as a result of which thousands of brass bands sprang up throughout Britain in the nineteenth century. Against the claim (Rose, 1895) that 'Adolphe Sax was the inventor of the brass band', the evidence presented by this dissertation shows that the Distin contribution (in spite of its sometimes dubious appropriation of the ideas of others, including Sax) was ultimately the more significant. While each separate strand of the Distins' entrepreneurial activity and their seminal influence on early brass band development is shown to be crucial, it is the combination of these strands which is used to make the case that without the Distins, the brass band as a medium would not have become established.

## **DECLARATION**

I declare that this dissertation is my own work and does not contain any unacknowledged material from any other sources.

Ray Farr

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Durham University for giving me the opportunity to spend time on this dissertation and the members of staff who have been so helpful and encouraging. In particular I would like to thank Professor Max Paddison, Professor Jeremy Dibble and Dr Mieko Kanno for their guidance.

## Introduction

The focus of this dissertation is the emergence of that very British institution, the brass band in the mid-nineteenth century, and in particular the role played in this by the Distin Family brass ensemble. This thesis argues not only that the Distins' distinctive contribution was to act as a catalyst for the development of the brass band movement from its early fragmented beginnings, but also – and most importantly – that without their contribution the brass band as a formalised and established medium in the form in which we know it today, together with its associated culture, would not have come into existence. This is not to say that the Distins were the sole cause for all that followed, but it is to say that theirs was the *most* significant influence (both directly and indirectly). The aim of this project is to explore the extent of the influence exercised by this family of musicians on every aspect of brass band development in Britain in the years 1830 to 1860, and to do this through a detailed examination of their impact on the spheres of performance practice, manufacturing and instrument technology, music publishing, arranging and dissemination, and the central role of band contests to the movement.

Methodologically I have taken a range of approaches in this project. First and foremost this is an historical musicological study of the Distins, their influence and the context in which they worked. This has involved a considerable amount of archival work, and I have made particular use of materials discovered in the course of my research in the British Library (especially Collingdale), the National Library of Scotland, and the Brass Band Archive in Wigan. At the same time two other approaches have been taken, which have been quite fundamental to the nature of the material itself. One of these has been the editing (and preparation of performing editions) of early brass band scores from the mid-nineteenth century that I have shown to have demonstrable links to the Distins. The other approach has been to seek out original instruments from the period, both to make a collection of these instruments for research purposes and to employ them in the performance of some of the music of the time. This has been essential not only to discuss these instruments in the context of the technical and

technological innovations of the period, and to show how Distin was involved in these developments (as well as the way in which he utilized ideas that had originated from others like Sax), but also to use them for performance. As a professional conductor, arranger and brass player myself I have been able to attempt to recreate the sounds and performance styles of the time, and to contribute to our knowledge of early brass band music-making. Building on the evidence accumulated through this tripartite approach of archival work, editing of early editions of scores, and practical exploration of brass instruments of the period, some manufactured by the Distins, I have been able to support my claims sufficiently to be able to speculate with some confidence on the distinctive features of early brass band performance practice in the middle of the nineteenth century. While one can never be certain in this kind of territory, because of the absence of complete sets of documentation, and obviously because of the lack of recordings, nevertheless one must at a certain stage be in a position to be able to make reasonably educated guesses.

In the course of my research I have uncovered much previously overlooked archival material that casts new light on the historical importance of the Distin Family and its work, and which clearly shows the need for a re-evaluation of their significance. This material challenges established views, ideas and conceptions of the birth of brass bands and the development of their repertory during the nineteenth century, and also serves to indicate something of the contemporary fame achieved by the Distins in all walks of life by the 1860s. Indeed, striking evidence that they had become a household name in mid-Victorian Britain is the reference to them, and the humorous consequences that might have flowed from their ubiquitous presence, is to be seen in the cartoon drawing in the magazine *Punch* (1862) which shows Henry Distin as multi instrumentalist testing a collection of instruments just prior to his extraordinary trade stand at the International Exhibition. Evidence of this kind is mostly ephemeral, but some is of real substance, with evidence of the Distins' involvement in the creation of a distinctive repertoire for the band movement they had encouraged, and enterprisingly supplied with instruments.

Brass bands have generally been categorized as ‘popular music’, and Herbert has suggested that brass bands and their music have received little scholarly interest<sup>1</sup> until relatively recently because of this ‘popular music’ label attached to them. The earlier literature on the subject from the nineteenth century includes the pioneering books by Algernon Rose, like *Talks with Bandsmen*<sup>2</sup> (1895) and also by Enderby Jackson in his *Origin and Promotion of Brass Band Contests* (1896); however, these are largely personalized, opinionated, and imprecise accounts, and are thin on historical detail. The first serious text on the subject only came in the 1930s, when Russell and Elliot published *The Brass Band Movement*<sup>3</sup> (1936).

It was Arthur Taylor’s book *Brass Bands*<sup>4</sup> (1979), and also Jack Scott’s pioneering but still unpublished PhD dissertation ‘The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England’<sup>5</sup> (1970) which first drew attention to the general lack of serious research in this important area. Subsequently the development of the brass band movement in nineteenth-century Britain has been extensively researched and documented by a number of significant scholars in this field. Particularly important among these are Dave Russell<sup>6</sup> (1987), Trevor Herbert<sup>7</sup> (1988, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2004), Arnold Myers<sup>8</sup> (1991, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2011), Ian Jones<sup>9</sup> (1995), Roy Newsome<sup>10</sup> (1998, 2005, 2006), Lloyd Farrar and Robert Eliason<sup>11</sup> (2001), and Eugenia Mitroulia<sup>12</sup> (2011).

That the Distin family had a role to play in the development of brass bands has certainly been acknowledged, especially by Jack Scott (1970) who states that ‘John Distin ... eventually

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991) p.7.

<sup>2</sup> Rose, Algernon, *Talks with Bandsmen*. (London: Bingham, 1895).

<sup>3</sup> Russell and Elliot. *The Brass Band Movement*. London: Dent, 1936.

<sup>4</sup> *Brass Bands* by Arthur Taylor. Granada Publishing Ltd Frogmore, St Albans, Herts. 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Scott, J. *The Evolution of the Brass Band & its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Russell, Dave. *Popular Music in England 1840-1914 A social history* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) p.175.

<sup>7</sup> See bibliography.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>9</sup> Jones, Ian, *Brass Bands in York 1833-1944* (York: University of York, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> See bibliography.

<sup>11</sup> Eliason, R. and Farrar, L. P. ‘Distin’, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy

<sup>12</sup> Mitroulia, Eugenia and Myers, Arnold, ‘The Distin Family as Instrument Makers and Dealers 1845-1874’. *Scottish Music Review*, Vol. 2, No 1 (2011).

became one of the most important personalities of the nineteenth century in brass music'<sup>13</sup>. Lloyd Farrar and Arnold Myers (2003) also claim that the Distin Family 'indeed influenced greatly the world of instrument manufacture and the explosive growth of brass bands during their lifetime.'<sup>14</sup> However, most scholars agree that brass bands and the Distins deserve more attention from historians and musicologists. Myers and Mitroulia acknowledge that 'the Distin Family is today unknown to most people'.<sup>15</sup> My research project takes its cue from the work of scholars such as these, and it seeks to fill in gaps and shed new light on already known facts.

Myers and Mitroulia state that the Distin influence was equally divided between performing and manufacturing enterprises<sup>16</sup>, while Robert Eliason and Farrar<sup>17</sup> maintain that it was the acquisition, by Distin, of the British agency for saxhorns that was the key factor in the development of the amateur brass band movement.<sup>18</sup> On examining the evidence I propose a different interpretation. The agreement between Adolphe Sax and the Distins was made around 1845 and transferred soon after Henry Distin took control of the company in 1851. This five or six year period is too short to be considered a 'key factor' and it is my view that the sale and distribution of saxhorns during those years, when Distins had the agency, was only a small contributing factor in the development of the brass band movement. I argue that the most important factor was the Distins themselves, through the full range of their activities within the brass band world over decades, which combined to have a powerful influence on almost every aspect of banding. Providing saxhorns for a short period was only a small part of their contribution, and as I claim in this dissertation, there was more to their influence than performances and manufacturing. Following Adolphe Sax's design, the saxhorn instruments

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<sup>13</sup> Scott, J. *The Evolution of the Brass Band & its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970)

<sup>14</sup> Farrar, L. P. and Myers, A. *Henry John Distin*, Paper given at the Galpin Society Conference on Musical Instruments, Oxford, London and Edinburgh, 7 August 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Mitroulia, Eugenia and Myers, Arnold, 'The Distin Family as Instrument Makers and Dealers 1845-1874'. *Scottish Music Review*, Vol. 2, No 1 (2011).

<sup>16</sup> Mitroulia, Eugenia and Myers, Arnold, 'The Distin Family as Instrument Makers and Dealers 1845-1874'. *Scottish Music Review*, Vol. 2, No 1 (2011).

<sup>17</sup> Eliason, R. and Farrar, L. P. 'Distin', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 27 March 2008).

were taken up by almost every kind of band throughout Europe and America and even Hector Berlioz championed the cause. At that time hundreds, if not thousands, of amateur and professional military bands became established; however, it was only in Britain that the all-brass band took root and developed into a movement while all other countries chose to incorporate the saxhorns into their existing wind bands. While the reasons for this phenomenon are due to a complex range of factors, it will be argued that the most significant difference was that Britain had the Distins.

The structure of this dissertation is built around an examination of key issues concerning the Distins' contribution to the development of the brass band movement. I argue that the influence of the Distin family, in particular of John and his second son Henry, was fundamental because it engaged materially with the development of brass bands in six substantial and concrete areas: (i) performance; (ii) performing styles, techniques and repertory; (iii) instrumentation and the gradual standardization of the format of the modern brass band; (iv) brass instrument importation, retailing and manufacturing; (v) arranging and publishing of sheet music; and (vi) contesting. The dissertation falls into two main parts: Part One, consisting of Chapters 1 to 4, and Part Two, consisting of Chapters 5 to 8.

Part One provides a historical context for the development of what became the 'brass band' and sets out to place the Distins within this and to argue a case for their seminal role. Chapters 1 to 4 set up the main stages of my argument and provide an overview of the activities of the Distins, which the main emphasis on the period from 1835, which marked the beginning of their family group performances, to 1868, which was the date when the Distin manufacturing business was sold. I propose that to understand the significance of the Distins' contribution it is first necessary to get a sense of the historical context of bands and ensembles in the period leading up to 1835. Chapter 1 accordingly gives an account of the beginnings of the bands in early nineteenth-century Britain and goes on to provide an overview of the key developments of the brass band in the light of the Distins' significant interventions and the importance of their

entrepreneurial activities. Chapter 2 examines the individuals in the Distin Family brass group and their particular skills. It does this through placing particular emphasis on John, the father of the family who was the virtuoso trumpet and keyed bugle player who founded the Distin Family ensemble and who instigated their business enterprises initially in connection with Sax. It also emphasizes the great importance of Henry, John's second son, who was directly responsible for developing the Distin Family business interests in the direction of musical instrument manufacturing. Chapter 3 considers the Distin Family brass ensemble itself, its performing activities, and how the group evolved through experimentation with different instrumental combinations into what we might today recognize as a brass band. It also sets out to indicate how the Distin Family ensemble served as a role model to the developing culture of nineteenth-century banding, and how at the same time it could be said to have functioned as the ideal marketing vehicle for the promotion of the instruments first of all imported, and then manufactured by the Distin firm. Chapter 4 discusses the importance of the Distins' performing activities in relation to their contribution to the development of repertory together with the influence of their presentational style.

Part Two takes up key issues raised in overview in Part One and seeks to develop and expand them in more detail in Chapters 5 to 8. Thus Chapter 5 focuses on the instrumentation of the ensemble and the adoption of saxhorns. Chapter 6 examines the important role played by the Distins as instrument manufacturers. Chapter 7 examines the output of the Distins as composers, arrangers and publishers, and the influence this had on the developing repertory for the brass band movement. Finally, Chapter 8 considers brass band contesting and the Distin influence.

The dissertation is divided into two volumes. Volume One contains the dissertation itself, while Volume Two contains the extensive Appendices. As discussed within the body of my main argument in the dissertation, important documentary material is presented in the Appendices, to which the reader is referred at relevant points. Appendix A provides a chronological list of nineteenth-century events and performances related to the Distins with

advertisements and reviews made from archival research. Appendix B is a copy of the Sax Instrument Catalogue from 1877; appendix C is a Distin repertory list; and appendix D is a list of Distin patents.

In the process of carrying out the research for this study I have also accumulated a collection of early brass band scores (many with direct Distin connections) and I am currently preparing scholarly editions of them. These scholarly editions (which have already found a publisher) will, hopefully, be taken up by modern bands and come to be regarded as an important aspect of the band heritage. These editions are not included here as such (I anticipate using them as part of a future research project), although the original unedited versions are often referred to in this dissertation. Also embedded throughout the dissertation are illustrations and photographs of nineteenth-century brass instruments, including several Distin antique instruments in excellent condition, some of which I have used in recent period performances.

## **Part One**

## Chapter 1

# The Evolution of the Brass Band Movement in Nineteenth-Century Britain

### Introduction

The brass band represents one of the most remarkable working-class cultural achievements in European history according to Dave Russell.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Russell claims that brass bands created the first mass involvement of working-class people in instrumental art music, not just in Britain, but possibly anywhere<sup>2</sup> and by the end of the nineteenth century thousands of these institutions existed.<sup>3</sup> Supporting these views, Trevor Herbert has stressed: ‘brass bands are important to Victorian cultural, social and music history’.<sup>4</sup> However, this movement did not simply appear out of nowhere. A range of social, cultural, and importantly, technical and technological developments also provided the foundations for the emergence of this phenomenon. At the same time, certain individuals, now largely forgotten by the brass band movement itself, played a fundamental and decisive role. Central among these individuals were John Distin and his remarkable family of musicians.

This dissertation takes as its starting point views of the relative significance of the Distin Family in the development of the brass band to be found in the existing research literature. For example, Jack Scott writes: ‘John Distin ... eventually became one of the most important personalities of the nineteenth century in brass music,’<sup>5</sup> while Lloyd Farrar and Arnold Myers claim that the Distins indeed, influenced greatly the world of instrument manufacture and the

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<sup>1</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.205.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.186.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991) p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Scott, Jack, *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970), p.29.

explosive growth of brass bands during their lifetime.<sup>6</sup> However, while there is some recognition of the Distin's contribution to this explosive growth, in terms of performance, manufacturing, publishing, arranging and contesting within the world of academic research, outside this sphere the Distin name in today's brass fraternity is virtually unknown. I argue here, in the light of material that has emerged from research I have carried out for this project, and which fills in many of the gaps in our knowledge of the Distins, that their influence should be viewed as seminal, for without their efforts brass bands would not have become established in the way they have.

In this chapter I provide a larger historical context, giving an overview of brass band evolution in the nineteenth century, and I identify certain important contributing factors such as the arrival of the valve, new brass instruments, significant bands, key individuals, repertory, publishing, the standardization of brass bands, and contests. Within this larger historical context I sketch in outline the contributions of the Distins in each of these aspects, and the ways in which they sought to exploit opportunities presented. This outline sketch provides the basis for the more detailed examinations of each of these aspects in the succeeding chapters.

## **Origins**

Before the start of the nineteenth century, communal amateur instrumental playing around Britain consisted of small, isolated groups of musicians playing an assortment of instruments. Some of these groups became bands, which functioned as church bands, town bands and military bands, with some musicians performing in each kind of ensemble. Most music was played from memory or improvised, but gradually musicians became more and more literate and an amateur band tradition became established. Professional musicians performing art music had, of course, been around for a long time, but these performances had been centred within the society of the upper

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<sup>6</sup> Farrar, L. P. and Myers, A. *Henry John Distin*, Paper given at the Galpin Society Conference on Musical Instruments, Oxford, London and Edinburgh, 7 August 2003.

classes<sup>7</sup> and so the beginning of an amateur tradition functioning in the lower classes provided an important legacy for the eventual development of the brass band movement.<sup>8</sup> While there were comparatively few professional brass players around and no widespread tradition of amateur brass playing before the nineteenth century,<sup>9</sup> there were the professional military bands, which according to Herbert, emerged in the 1790s and came in three styles: regular army bands, militia bands, and volunteer corps bands. These bands normally numbered between six and twelve players (plus percussion) and the most common instruments in the bands were trumpets, clarinets, fifes and flutes on upper parts, with horns, bassoons, serpents and trombones on the lower parts.<sup>10</sup>

There were also church bands in rural Britain, at their commonest between 1780 and 1830, although according to Herbert, ‘brass instruments did not figure prominently in church bands’.<sup>11</sup> Town and village bands were common at the beginning of the nineteenth century and some cities still employed waits. These were paid-musicians who played in small groups for various civic functions and had their origins in a tradition lasting hundreds of years. However, the Municipal Corporation Reform Act of 1835 resulted in the dismissal of the few remaining civic musicians,<sup>12</sup> although many of the groups had lost their support several years earlier due to the economic effects of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.<sup>13</sup>

Formally organised amateur bands did not appear until about 1815, with the first specifically all-brass bands making their appearance in the 1830s<sup>14</sup> with one of the earliest recorded brass bands being the Coxlodge Institute Band of County Durham, which was founded in 1808. While detailed records of this particular band are lost, the history of the Cyfarthfa band, from Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales, is however well documented. They are said to be the first *British* all-brass band established in 1832 with the first known *English* all-brass band is said to be the York Amateur brass

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<sup>7</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>12</sup> Bevan, Clifford, ‘Brass Band Contests: Art or Sport?’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.102.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, Arthur, *Brass Bands* (Hertford: Granada Pub. Ltd., 1979), p.16.

<sup>14</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.174.

band, formed in 1833 by Daniel Hardman and James Walker.<sup>15</sup> At the beginning of the nineteenth century only three types of brass instruments existed: trumpets, horns, and trombones and while trombonists were employed by the civic authorities as waits and also occasionally by cathedrals, ‘the trumpet and horn had little special and individual significance in art music in Britain’.<sup>16</sup> (There was also the serpent, which is described later).

The first important technical development came with the invention of the keyed-bugle, made (according to some authorities) by Joseph Halliday in 1810.<sup>17</sup> This was a chromatic version of the signal bugle, which had been around for many years and the new design became an essential feature of early bands.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 1: Keyed bugle

Source: Durham University collection of antique brass instruments

<sup>15</sup> See Newsome, Roy *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p.5. See also Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.194.

<sup>16</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.9.

<sup>17</sup> The invention of the bugle has, for many year been attributed to Joseph Halliday, however, recent research by Lasocki, and published in the Historical Brass Society’s journals 2009 & 2010, has contradicted this.

<sup>18</sup> Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p.4.

The keyed bugle initially had five keys and a compass of twenty-five notes and after some developments (including those of John Distin) was called the 'Royal Kent Bugle'. It was the first chromatic brass instrument in the soprano register, and was dedicated to Prince Edward the Duke of Kent and Strathearn (1767-1820). The most outstanding performer of the keyed bugle was John Distin whose instrument was borrowed and copied by the Frenchman Jean Hilaire Asté (or Halary) in order to make similar instruments in various sizes forming a family of instruments which he patented<sup>19</sup> and called ophicleides. The patent describes four types of instruments: a clavitube (keyed bugle), quinticlave (alto ophicleide), l'ophicleide (bass ophicleide) and a clarion métallique (a type of bass clarinet).<sup>20</sup>



Figure 2: Ophicleide

Source: Durham University collection of antique brass instruments

These ophicleides gradually replaced the bass horn and the serpent, which had previously been used in Britain for nearly 250 years.

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<sup>19</sup> French patent No.1849 of 1821. Dudgeon, Ralph, 'Keyed Bugle', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy <http://www.grovemusic.com> (Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> October 2009).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.



Figure 3: Bass horn



Figure 4: Ophicleide

Source: Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments

The name ophicleide is the Greek word for ‘keyed serpent’, alluding to the medieval instrument it replaced (shown above-right) and while Halary may claim to have invented the instrument, Fétis asserts,<sup>21</sup> that ‘in 1790, Fricot, a French musician, residing in London, invented the ophicleide’ and Victor Mahillon maintains that Régibo was the inventor.<sup>22</sup> However, it is interesting to note that the maker of the first ophicleide in London was John Astor and, while no date is given for Astor’s instrument, Rose states, ‘at the battle of Waterloo, the ophicleide was used in the regimental bands of both the English and Belgian armies’, which means that, contrary to most sources, Halary did not invent the ophicleide.

The next, and without doubt the most significant development in the technology of brass instruments came with the invention of the valve, and while Scott maintains that in 1788 an Englishman named Charles Clagget invented chromatic trumpets and horns by means of a valve

<sup>21</sup> Rose, Algernon, *Talks with Bandmen*. (London: Bingham, 1895), p.222.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.245.

system,<sup>23</sup> most authorities state that Heinrich Stölzel and Bluhmel were the inventors in 1814 who took out patents in 1817. A rotary valve was largely the work of Riedl, and this was patented in 1832.<sup>24</sup> Both Stölzel and Bluhmel were awarded a joint patent, although each claimed the ‘system’ their own, rather than a shared invention<sup>25</sup> and after various ‘improvements’ by manufacturers such as Adolphe Sax and Henry Distin, the basic design of the valve adopted for general use was that of the Parisian maker Étienne François Périnet in 1838.<sup>26</sup> Primitive groups and bands were transformed by the invention and application of the valve to brass instruments which provided full chromaticism and gave greater flexibility and scope for the whole brass instrument family. Newsome considers the application of the valve almost *entirely* responsible for the growth of brass bands<sup>27</sup> and Herbert concurs that the invention of the valve and its application, revolutionized<sup>28</sup> brass instrumental playing and was the principle reason why a large, working-class brass band movement came into existence.<sup>29</sup> Herbert may be correct in this statement as sales of valved brass instruments of all shapes and sizes numbered in their thousands especially when the Distin instrument factory became established around 1850.

## Growth

Of critical importance to the growth of brass bands in Britain, according to Herbert, were economic, pedagogic and other pragmatic factors.<sup>30</sup> However, Myers suggests that the widespread adoption of the new all-brass instrumentation was a matter of taste: a preference for the sound of concerted

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<sup>23</sup> Scott, Jack, *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Dissertation submitted to University of Sheffield 1970), p.39.

<sup>24</sup> Reynish, Tim, ‘British Wind Music before 1981’ Website: <http://www.timreynish.com/repnatbwm.html> (Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> October 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.217.

<sup>26</sup> Myers, Arnold, ‘Instruments and Instrumentation in British Brass Bands’ in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.178.

<sup>27</sup> Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p.24.

<sup>28</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Victorian Brass Bands: Class, Taste and Space’ in Reynolds, G (et al), *The Place of Music: Music, Space and the Production of Place*, (London: Longman, 1998), p.109.

<sup>29</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

brass instruments.<sup>31</sup> Newsome gives two main reasons for the growing popularity of bands in the early 1840s: firstly, the great improvements in the manufacture of brass instruments and secondly, brass instruments were undoubtedly easier to learn to play<sup>32</sup> - a point supported by Russell, who writes, 'brass instruments were relatively straightforward to learn.'<sup>33</sup> An aspiring musician with limited resources of time and money could achieve results relatively quickly on a brass instrument compared to a wind or stringed one, and some, like the Distins, became highly proficient.

Herbert suggests there were three types of amateur brass bands in the early stages of development; those that benefited from sponsorship, the subscription bands and those attached to the volunteer movement.<sup>34</sup> Amateur bands needed financial support in order to exist, and some sought patronage from wealthy people, while others found sponsorship from industrialists<sup>35</sup> who were persuaded that music offered the entrepreneur, large and small, 'a rich field'.<sup>36</sup>

Russell maintains that, 'formal organisations may have resulted from the dissolution of church bands'<sup>37</sup> and his argument is strong when we consider that when organs were re-installed to churches many amateur musicians who had previously played in the services may have found a niche in the town band.<sup>38</sup>

Authorities such as Taylor, however, maintain that the development of an amateur band movement came as a result of the influence of military bands and their music<sup>39</sup> and this view can be supported by the fact that military musicians, such as John Distin, became bandmasters, leaders, teachers and arrangers. After Waterloo (1815) there were many musicians amongst the redundant soldiers who found themselves at home with little or nothing to do but dwell upon memories; an alternative option was to continue their activities in civilian life. The same problem of readjustment

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<sup>31</sup> Myers, Arnold, 'Instruments and Instrumentation in British Brass Bands' in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.169.

<sup>32</sup> Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p.29.

<sup>33</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.220.

<sup>34</sup> Herbert, Trevor, 'Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement', in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.24.

<sup>35</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.216.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.179.

<sup>37</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.196.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, Arthur, *Brass Bands* (Hertford: Granada Pub. Ltd., 1979), p.16.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27.

faced the Volunteer bands<sup>40</sup> and as Russell states; once the Napoleonic Wars were over, it is probable that many former military musicians put their musical experience to use.<sup>41</sup> The military bands that remained were supported by the patronage of the commanding officers (mostly from a wealthy background)<sup>42</sup> who paid, from their own pockets, the costs of keeping (or hiring) a band for parades and military functions. Royalty and members of the aristocracy also kept private bands for their own use, for example the Prince Regent's Band,<sup>43</sup> formed around 1795 by the Prince of Wales. This band was composed entirely of selected, skilled musicians from Britain and abroad - including John Distin and when, in 1820, George IV became king the name of the outfit was changed to the King's Household Band. Queen Victoria also formed a private band in 1837.<sup>44</sup>

The Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, of that time, had far-reaching effects on the poorer people of Britain<sup>45</sup> and also on the structure of popular musical life.<sup>46</sup> Russell claims the twin processes of industrialisation and urbanisation had a major influence<sup>47</sup> on bands which were formed from the workers in factories, mines and mills. The expansion and formalising of leisure time that took place from the mid-nineteenth century were two of the key social changes of the industrial age<sup>48</sup> and a regular, weekly band rehearsal at a set place and time was the result of the new work discipline.<sup>49</sup> Enterprising industrialists and the middle-class mill and mine owners were anxious to jollify opening ceremonies and worker's 'treats',<sup>50</sup> and to add dignity to formal occasions such as political rallies and demonstrations.<sup>51</sup> These industrialists, usually from the upper-middle classes, were witnessing, on a regular basis, the distinction and fame achieved by the Distin Family, and saw

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.17.

<sup>41</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.194.

<sup>42</sup> Taylor, Arthur, *Brass Bands* (Hertford: Granada Pub. Ltd., 1979), p.17.

<sup>43</sup> Carse, Adam, 'The Prince Regent's Band' *Music and Letters* JSTOR 1946 OUP.

<sup>44</sup> Herbert, Trevor, 'Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement', in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.7.

<sup>45</sup> Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* Ashgate, Aldershot 1998, p.2.

<sup>46</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.198.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.198.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.197.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.197.

the value of such performances in terms of moral improvement<sup>52</sup> and cultural reform.<sup>53</sup> Music making was seen as a civilising influence with a general attitude that regarded music as a force for better morality amongst working people.<sup>54</sup> Their support was an attempt to gain some political control of the masses for fear of unrest<sup>55</sup> and possible strike action, or even revolt, and equally pervasive was the belief that music could act as a social cement.<sup>56</sup> However, while these entrepreneurs utilised music-making as a vehicle of control, they must to some extent have been influenced by their love of the art,<sup>57</sup> and by 1850, says Jackson, ‘almost every village and group of mills in the north of England had its own band’<sup>58</sup> and Russell adds, ‘perhaps the majority of working-class bandsmen were miners’.<sup>59</sup>

Russell maintains that at the heart of the earliest attempts to provide ‘decent’ popular musical recreation was the desire to limit the place of drink in working-class culture,<sup>60</sup> and while several bands had important links with temperance organisations<sup>61</sup> the prominence of alcohol and the public house in the band world was significant. Public houses frequently acted as band headquarters, providing a gathering point and a rehearsal place.<sup>62</sup>

Another contributing factor to the growth of bands was that of increased musical education. A host of self-appointed music professors sprang up to satisfy the needs of an ambitious working class, such as: ‘Messrs. Distin, professors of the saxhorns’,<sup>63</sup> and it became apparent that knowledge was power, and in addition to these professors of music, were the professional conductors of military bands, who had close associations with many amateur bands and an interest in their development. Yet despite the increase of formal training and education in bands, the main transfer

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.36.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.24.

<sup>54</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.21.

<sup>55</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.24.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.25.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.27.

<sup>58</sup> Jackson, Enderby, ‘Origin and Promotion of Brass Band Contests’. *British Musician and Orchestral Times*, (July 1896), p.131.

<sup>59</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.214.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.25.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.212.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.273.

<sup>63</sup> *The Times*, January 18<sup>th</sup> 1847 p4

of knowledge and skills was from generation to generation or as Russell puts it ‘the key institution in the training of bandsmen was very often the family,<sup>64</sup> and in this respect the Distin Family was the pinnacle of achievement.

The class system itself is thought by some to be an important contributing factor in the development of brass bands. Herbert, for example, maintains that the early development of brass bands was led ‘either by commerce or by socially superior classes’.<sup>65</sup> While acceptance by the upper and middle-classes was essential to the survival of bands, the resilience of the working population was, argues Russell, the most crucial factor.<sup>66</sup> The working classes were not mere recipients but co-partners in the process of cultural production<sup>67</sup> and Russell expands these ideas with the statement: ‘in the last analysis, the brass band movement’s strength and quality was derived from the working class.’<sup>68</sup> With the exemplar of the professional military band or the Distin Family, a factory worker or miner with ambitions to improve his quality of life, could achieve some success playing a brass instrument in a band. However, the band, through its function as entertainer, could reach out beyond the social class which produced it<sup>69</sup> and from the middle of the nineteenth century sections of the English working class began to enjoy an improvement in financial status.<sup>70</sup> Between 1876 and 1896, the years of the Great Depression, the combined effect of a slight increase in actual wage rates and a 40% decrease in prices resulted in a national rise in real wages of 66%. This meant that sections of the working class had an increased economic capacity for musical enjoyment<sup>71</sup> and this new financial position affected banding in another respect; hire purchase, which enabled working-class people and organisations to buy their own instruments, and has been described as ‘the very basis of the brass band’.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p.221.

<sup>65</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.8.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p.198.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.216.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p.214.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>72</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Victorian Brass Bands: Class, Taste and Space’ in Reynolds, G (et al), *The Place of Music: Music, Space and the Production of Place*, (London: Longman, 1998), p.110.

At this time, concert-going became a more common activity and, perhaps more importantly, as far as the history of brass bands is concerned, the franchise for listening to ‘serious’ music widened beyond the middle classes<sup>73</sup> and according to Russell, ‘the appearance of concerts aimed at a broad-based, ticket-buying audience was a new phenomenon.’ This can be seen, for example, in reports from Distin concerts where audience figures were in their thousands (see Appendix A).

The volunteer movement, founded in Britain in May 1859 fearing a French invasion, proved another important stimulant to the development of the brass band.<sup>74</sup> The new volunteer bands were heavily subsidised by the government, and considerable funding of the volunteer force was spent on bands during this period. The regiments, officered by the upper and middle classes, absorbed and utilised local bands, many of which were all-brass bands, and were often provided with rehearsal rooms, instruments and uniforms<sup>75</sup> and as Herbert says, ‘the volunteer movement both created and saved many brass bands’.<sup>76</sup> One such newly created brass band was Distin’s Employees Band which also functioned as an army volunteer band, paid when required by the Queen Victoria’s Rifles regiment.<sup>77</sup>

While loyal supporters for the Salvation Army might insist that their brass bands were an important facet in the developing brass band scene, Russell is adamant that, ‘in no sense were Salvation Army bands part of the orthodox band tradition. In fact there was positive hostility between the two camps.’<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, mention should be made of the inclusion of the brass band as a medium into the Salvation Army and the subsequent growth of their bands on a parallel trajectory. The first official Salvation Army Corps band was formed in Consett, County Durham in December 1879<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.21.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p.212.

<sup>75</sup> Taylor, Arthur, *Brass Bands* (Hertford: Granada Pub. Ltd., 1979), p.50.

<sup>76</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.30.

<sup>77</sup> *The Illustrated News of the World*, June 15<sup>th</sup> 1861.

<sup>78</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.212.

<sup>79</sup> Holz, Ronald W., *Brass Bands of the Salvation Army*. (England: Streets Publishers, 2006), p.69.

Another important aspect in the development of brass bands in the nineteenth century was the opportunity that arose for people to travel by train,<sup>80</sup> and as Russell says, ‘it is inconceivable that such events as the Belle Vue and Crystal Palace band championships, which involved the transportation of thousands of competitors and spectators over distances of up to 300 miles, could have developed without the railway’.<sup>81</sup> The railway companies made concessionary fares available to bandsmen, and this facility was to become vital to the expansion of the brass band movement.<sup>82</sup> Special mention should be made here, of the pioneering efforts of impresario John Enderby Jackson (1827–1903) who, in 1860, negotiated special arrangements directly with the railway companies to transport bandsmen and supporters to his series of competitions held at the Crystal Palace in Sydenham, London (see Chapter 8). Brass bands were also in demand at seaside resorts, exhibitions, flower shows, Sunday-school outings and so forth<sup>83</sup> and the availability in the 1840s of inexpensive rail travel made it possible for brass band musicians to undertake concert tours.

## Manufacturing

While some historians suggest that brass instrumental development and brass bands grew from a desire for improved, sophisticated instruments and artistic freedom, Herbert says that brass bands came into existence with ‘capitalist-inspired motives of inventors, instrument manufacturers and publishers’.<sup>84</sup> Whatever the motives, the manufacturing of brass instruments became a huge concern with the arrival of the valve, which revolutionised brass bands. Initially, the valve was applied to horns and trumpets and then to the post horn, which became the cornet. Schwartz, in his article *The Cornet Compendium*, states that the cornet was invented in 1825,<sup>85</sup> but Myers suggests that it was

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p.273.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>82</sup> Taylor, Arthur, *Brass Bands* (Hertford: Granada Pub. Ltd., 1979), p.40.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p.273.

<sup>84</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.49.

<sup>85</sup> Schwartz, Richard, ‘The Cornet Compendium’, website: <http://www.angelfire.com/music2/thecornetcompendium> (Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> October 2009).

circa 1828.<sup>86</sup> There is no evidence to show who made the first cornet; it could have been the same person credited with inventing the ophicleide, Halary of Paris,<sup>87</sup> but no matter who invented the instrument, the cornet's popularity, when it arrived in Britain around 1833, was immediate.<sup>88</sup> When the Distin's brought the cornet into their ensemble in 1840 and the Grenadier Guards band also took them up, the success of the cornet was assured.

In the 1850s a widespread adoption of the first recognised family of brass instruments took place; the saxhorns<sup>89</sup>, invented by the Belgian Adolphe (Antoine-Joseph) Sax. Taylor, Russell and Newsome agree that 'saxhorns brought about the most important development in brass instruments after the arrival of the cornet'.<sup>90</sup> Saxhorns were sold in large numbers throughout Europe soon after their creation and were introduced to Britain through the Distin Family's exhibition tours of 1844.<sup>91</sup> Following the acquisition of the British agency for saxhorns the Distins established a major brass instrument manufacturing company, and when the Mossley Temperance Band won the 1853 Belle Vue contest, performing on a complete set of saxhorns supplied by Distin; other bands were inspired to begin the process of conversion to these new instruments<sup>92</sup>. Herbert, Eliassen and Farrar agree that 'the Distins gave the Sax designs a powerful endorsement'<sup>93</sup> and Russell adds, 'the saxhorns owe much of their popularity in Britain to the Distin Family.'<sup>94</sup>

In other European countries such as France, Germany, Belgium, where saxhorns were also adopted in large numbers, all-brass bands did not take root, and I suggest that one important reason was that these countries did not have the sustained example of highly virtuosic brass ensembles like that of the Distins to provide an attractive model of what an all-brass band could achieve. While the Distins made several trips to the continent and received glowing commendations, in

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<sup>86</sup> Myers, Arnold, 'Instruments in the British Brass Band' in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands, The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.174.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p.174.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.174.

<sup>89</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.217.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p.178.

<sup>91</sup> Jones, Ian, *Brass Bands in York 1833-1944* (York: University of York, 1995), P.9.

<sup>92</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.218.

<sup>93</sup> Herbert, Trevor, 'Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement', in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.19.

<sup>94</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in Britain 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.218.

general, there are some hints as to the reasons for their failure to ignite an all-brass band growth when we read reports such as the following German concert review of July 2<sup>nd</sup> 1844.<sup>95</sup>

In the Grand Hall the night before yesterday, The Distin Family opened their series of performances on klappent trumpets, following their serenade in the lovely facilities of the Pavilion the night before. The memory of which triggered remarks, that the harsh tones of the brass instruments appeared more enjoyable outdoors rather than in a confined space, and even when put next to the nightingale, this artistic family will do well to devote themselves to more of the gay and lively rather than the melting style.\*

\* Implied, the klapphorns and chromatic trumpets sound good where they belong. However, when the music requires soul and emotion, brass should stay away because they distort the tender and noble towards caricature. [Note in original.]

There are several reasons why the Distin Family brass ensemble may not have exerted the same kind of enthusiasm for brass music performance on the continent compared to that of the remarkable popularity achieved in Britain. Firstly, trumpets were regarded as suitable for outdoor use *only* and not for 'art music' (as may be deduced from the report above), and the educated German public had an expectation and perception as to the role of brass instruments. Some clearly disapproved of operatic areas played on brass instruments and considered that such instruments should be reserved for martial, uplifting and rousing music only. Secondly, the Distins, and their instruments, were viewed as foreign and because of the prevailing political unrest, there was distrust towards anything and anyone foreign. Furthermore, the reputation of the Distins as purveyors of musical excellence had not preceded them and the German audiences, at that time, were not suitably open minded or impressed with their saxhorn performances to consider their type of brass performance as an alternate for the existing cultured musical ensembles. Pictures of early German bands (military and community) show a preponderance towards brass instruments with very few woodwind instruments and while saxhorns were sold in large numbers to Germany, local composers and arrangers continued to utilize and develop woodwind instruments to cover the upper, melodic parts. Without the sustained example of the Distin Family brass ensemble playing art music, all-brass combinations failed to develop. Amateur bands in Germany today are mostly wind bands and while they do have national characteristics, they are international in style and

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<sup>95</sup> *Baderblatt für die Grossherzogliche Stadt Baden*, July 2<sup>nd</sup> 1844.

instrumentation. The hundreds of amateur bands are very well organised and take part in community events, concerts and competitions in a similar way to contemporary British brass bands.

### **Significant bands and key individuals**

Brass band development in nineteenth-century Britain was often encouraged by a leading figure or group entering the scene at various times, stimulating further development. Enderby Jackson (1827-1903) is the first noteworthy name from this period, mainly due his entrepreneurial success<sup>96</sup>. After attending one of Frenchman Louis Jullien's (1812-1860) performances, Jackson was inspired to follow him in his quest of 'bringing music to the people'.<sup>97</sup> According to Russell, 'nobody did more to encourage the habit of concert-going amongst the working and lower middle classes than the conductor/promoter Louis Jullien<sup>98</sup> and it was Jullien's pioneering spirit which motivated Enderby Jackson. Distin and Jackson were close friends and worked together on several brass band events.

When Adolphe Sax invented his saxhorns in 1844, he became highly significant in the development of brass bands (as mentioned earlier) and his association with the Distins is an important thread through this dissertation.

Richard Smith was probably the most successful of the early band trainers<sup>99</sup> in Britain.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p.20.

<sup>97</sup> Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p.13.

<sup>98</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.78

<sup>99</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.223.



Figure 5: Richard Smith  
Source: Illustrated News of the World, August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1861

Later in the century, a group of three musicians came to dominate the brass band scene: John Gladney, Alexander Owen and Edwin Swift;<sup>100</sup> known today as the ‘triumvirate’ who between them trained every successful band for over forty years, shaping the history of the brass band movement.<sup>101</sup> Gladney received the unofficial title, bestowed on him during his lifetime, of ‘father of the brass band movement’.<sup>102</sup>

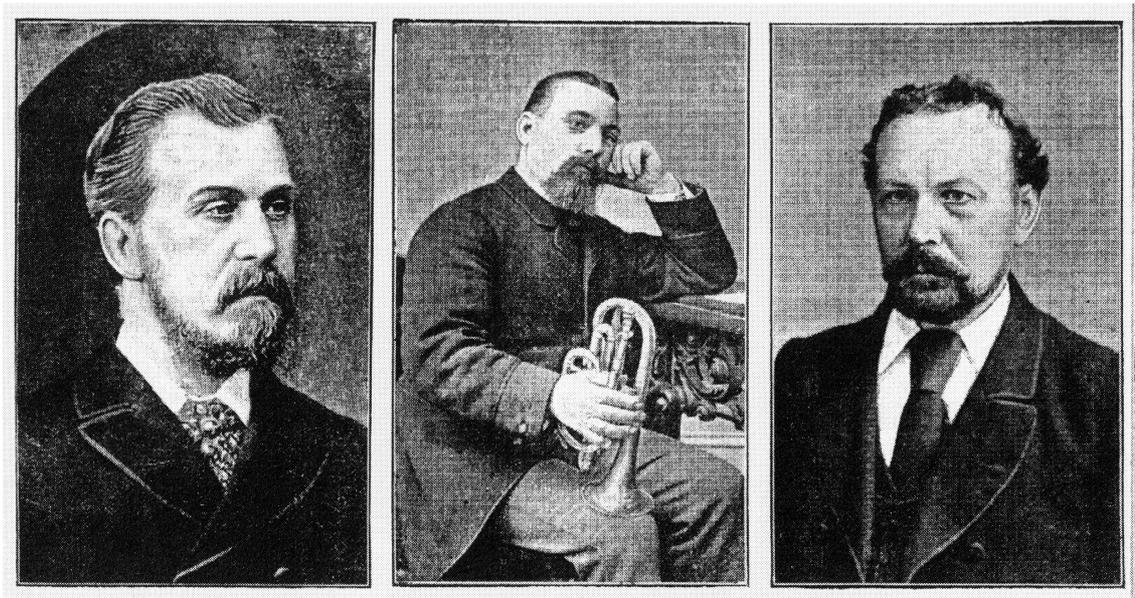


Figure 6: John Gladney, Alexander Owen and Edwin Swift  
Source: Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998)

<sup>100</sup> Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p.48.

<sup>101</sup> Taylor, Arthur, *Brass Bands* (Hertford: Granada Pub. Ltd., 1979), p.104.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p.74.

Some of the bands during this period earned legendary status, including Mossley Temperance, Black Dyke, Meltham Mills, Besses o'th'Barn, Fodens and St Hilda Colliery for their outstanding achievements in competitions. There were also notable brass instrumentalists, for example: the father and son trumpeters Thomas Harper senior and junior, Jules Levy, the great cornet virtuoso, Hermann Koenig, the famous cornettist and, as previously mentioned, the Distin Family brass ensemble.

### **Instrumental standardization, repertory and music publishing**

While, at first, there was no standardized instrumentation for brass bands, by 1854 the distinction between wind bands and brass bands was quite precise.<sup>103</sup> Jones agrees that the instrumental standardization of brass bands came by the mid-1850s,<sup>104</sup> while Russell gives the date as around 1870<sup>105</sup> and Herbert suggests that it was around 1875.<sup>106</sup> Standardisation of brass band instrumentation came as a result of several influences but perhaps the most important was the music publishing industry which started producing printed music sets for bands in a limited way in the 1830s, almost as soon as bands became established as a medium.<sup>107</sup> The first known example of a publication specifically for a brass band is MacFarlane's *Eight Popular Airs for Brass band*, published by R. Cocks and Co. of London in 1836<sup>108</sup> but it was the Distin publications of the *Brass Band Journals* in 1869 which eventually established a standardized instrumentation for the brass band as we know it (see Chapter 7). Once the new standardized instrumentation was established and cemented by the music publishing industry, bands happily settled for their publications and the line-up they suggested.<sup>109</sup> Standardization also allowed the realization of the concept of the compulsory test piece, which all bands were required to play in a contest, thus giving a fairer basis of

<sup>103</sup> Taylor, Arthur, *Brass Bands* (Hertford: Granada Pub. Ltd., 1979), p.41.

<sup>104</sup> Jones, Ian, *Brass Bands in York 1833-1944* (York: University of York, 1995), p.2.

<sup>105</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.217.

<sup>106</sup> Herbert, Trevor, 'Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement', in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.8.

<sup>107</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.174.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.175.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p.220.

comparison<sup>110</sup>. When John Gladney was appointed conductor to Meltham Mills Band in 1871, he remodelled the band's instrumentation to that recommended by Distin's publications to:

- 1 Eb Soprano Cornet
- 3 Bb Solo Cornets
- 2 Bb Repiano Cornets
- 1 Bb 2<sup>nd</sup> Cornet
- 1 Bb 3<sup>rd</sup> Cornet
- 1 Bb Flugel Horn
- 3 Eb Tenor saxhorns
- 2 Bb Baritone saxhorns
- 3 Trombones
- 2 Bb Euphoniums (Bass saxhorns)
- 2 Eb Bass Tubas (Bombardons)
- 2 Bb Bass Tubas
- Percussion (as required)

and because of his success, the combination became the model for all brass bands,<sup>111</sup> and has remained virtually the same until today.

The repertory for early brass bands, aside from contests, encompassed a wide variety of styles and Herbert says: 'it is hard to think of another musical ensemble that had such a wide range of repertoire at this time.'<sup>112</sup> Their repertoire included operatic selections and even complete overtures,<sup>113</sup> but generally there was a distinct blend of art and popular music that is still a feature of the band repertory today.<sup>114</sup> These arrangements were mostly provided by skilled professional bandmasters, such as John Distin, who were influential figures in the formation of the brass band idiom.<sup>115</sup> While many publishing companies were established throughout Britain in the nineteenth century the most significant were R. Smith, Distin, and Wright & Round. Publishers were not limited to sheet music production, and the establishment of magazines such as Brass Band News

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<sup>110</sup> Bevan, Clifford, 'Brass Band Contests: Art or Sport?', in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.113.

<sup>111</sup> Taylor, Arthur, *Brass Bands* (Hertford: Granada Pub. Ltd., 1979), p.73.

<sup>112</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.228.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p.229.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p.228.

<sup>115</sup> Herbert, Trevor, 'Victorian Brass Bands: Class, Taste and Space' in Reynolds, G (et al), *The Place of Music: Music, Space and the Production of Place*, (London: Longman, 1998), p.119.

(1881) and *British Bandsman* (1887) did much to guide and stimulate the growing brass band movement and to construct its identity.<sup>116</sup>

## Contests

Several authors have built a case in support of the relevance of contests to the development of brass bands in nineteenth-century Britain. Taylor has no doubt that when contests first began they proved a unifying and energising force which helped to give bands and banding an essential identity.<sup>117</sup> Contests provided financial and material rewards for bands, and the benefits of greater reputation and higher esteem, and these events also acted as forums for the entire brass band movement.<sup>118</sup> The origins of brass band contests lay in bell-ringing competitions dating from 1745,<sup>119</sup> and with the increased enthusiasm for team sports such as football. While the first recorded band contest was in Sheffield in 1818, the first formal brass band contest took place in 1845 at Burton Constable, near Hull in Yorkshire, as part of a day of general merrymaking organised for the local people by Sir Clifford Constable<sup>120</sup> with instruments supplied by the Distin company (see Chapter 8).

As contesting became a regular part of most bands' calendars, two main events took pride of place. The first was the Belle Vue Manchester contest, which first started in 1853 and is still running today as the British Open Championships, was organised by John Jennison, manager of the Belle Vue Gardens, and James Melling. The winner of the first Belle Vue contest was the Mossley Band performing on a set of instruments supplied by the Distin Company<sup>121</sup>. The second most important event in the band's contesting calendar was held at the Crystal Palace in London and organised by Enderby Jackson with assistance from Henry Distin<sup>122</sup>. Jackson negotiated with the railway companies to provide free, or cheap, transport for all the participants, enabling hundreds of

<sup>116</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.176.

<sup>117</sup> Taylor, Arthur, *Brass Bands* (Hertford: Granada Pub. Ltd., 1979), p.32.

<sup>118</sup> Herbert, Trevor, 'Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement', in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.37.

<sup>119</sup> Bevan, Clifford, 'Brass Band Contests: Art or Sport?', in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.103.

<sup>120</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.207.

<sup>121</sup> see Chapter 8.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*,

bandsmen and supporters, travelling mostly from the north, to attend the contest in London. 1860, the year of the first Crystal Palace contest, was a major landmark in the history of brass bands,<sup>123</sup> and the contest continues to this day as The National Brass Band Championships. Contests are by their nature sporting events but it should be mentioned, however, that bandsmen were aiming for excellence in music performance and glowing reports from reviewers indicate that standards were very high indeed. The successful bands, naturally, became influential to the growth of the movement.

## Conclusions

This chapter has shown that the evolutionary forces affecting the development of the brass band movement in nineteenth-century Britain may be seen as numerous and varied, and the combination and balance of these factors is weighted differently amongst authors such as Taylor, Scott, Russell, Eliason and Farrar, Newsome and Herbert. While research is sketchy in places, the factual growth and development of brass bands by the end of the nineteenth century suggests that a great social and musical change took place<sup>124</sup> and by 1890 there were an estimated 30,000 bands in existence in Britain.<sup>125</sup> The overview, which has been presented, has outlined the important contributing forces to brass band development and in each of these aspects the Distin name is significantly prominent.

The following chapters examine the weight of significance of the Distins, and I argue that the effects of their influence was fundamentally crucial to the evolution, development and establishment of brass bands in nineteenth-century Britain through their performances, experiments with brass instruments, teaching, arranging, publishing, contesting and, most importantly, their instrument manufacturing.

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<sup>123</sup> Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p.38.

<sup>124</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.17.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p.118.

## Chapter 2

### The Distin Family Members

#### Introduction

I have argued that the Distin Family brass ensemble members were able directly, and indirectly, to influence brass band development at a crucial stage of its evolution in nineteenth-century Britain. But exactly how did they affect this development? Each of the individuals in the group contributed in different ways and their influence had an impact not only on brass band development but also the wider musical scene in nineteenth-century Britain, particularly through brass instrument manufacturing. This chapter aims to show the importance of each of the members of the Distin Family to brass band development and identifies and evaluates their individual attributes as well as their enormous, collective influences. In order to evaluate these influences we need to examine their skills and experience, establish their credentials, and show how these attributes were applied. With an examination of the individuals in the Distin group we may better understand how they were able to make such an impression and leave such a strong legacy on brass bands.



Figure 7: The Distin Family – from the left: George, Henry, John, Theodore and William c1830  
Source: Undated lithograph from the Marjorie Waterman Collection, Royal Academy of Music

I shall begin by identifying the individuals in the picture above from 1830. On the left is George with a trombone, an instrument which has changed very little since its invention. George started playing the natural horn, learning with his brothers, but later took up the trombone (unusually pitched in D), which he played before moving to the bass saxhorn in the family brass group. The trombone was used during this period, mostly as a bass instrument so it is somewhat surprising that he played, what was in effect, an alto slide trombone. However, as a young man with short arms, the lower slide positions of the alto trombone would have been easier to reach than those of the more commonly used tenor trombone.

Next in the picture, at the rear, is Mrs. Distin (nee, Ann Matilda Loder) sitting at the piano. She came from an eminent musical family of the time and was the sister of John David Loder who was, for a period, a professor at the Royal Academy of Music in London and helped form the Bath Choral Society (1819). Making connections and developing contacts are important entrepreneurial aspects in the success of the Distin Family group as will be examined in subsequent chapters.

Next in the picture is Henry John Distin playing a natural horn probably pitched in F. Henry played a variety of instruments within the group during its career and features largely in the following chapters in several regards (as will be discussed). Then comes the father John with a slide trumpet,<sup>1</sup> and Theodore and William playing natural horns. The importance of these instruments will be revealed but from various accounts this was an extraordinarily talented, musical family, ideally situated in history to inspire a burgeoning brass band movement.

## **John Henry Distin**

As mentioned, it is important to establish the credentials of each member of the Distin Family in order to establish their eminence and this is done at the outset. The father in the Distin Family brass group, John Henry Distin, was born (like several generations of Distins) in Plympton, St Mary's, Devon in 1793. At eleven years of age, John and his younger brother performed in

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<sup>1</sup> Introduced by the English trumpeter John Hyde, at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

public a flute duet at a concert given by the South Devon Militia Band<sup>2</sup> (an official reserve army made up of conscripts) where the bandmaster was so impressed by the two boys that he ‘obtained their enlistment as band-boys under his instruction’<sup>3</sup> and so began the Distin career in music. The band of the South Devon Militia probably had a corps of drums, a fife group or a corps of bugles, which was utilized for military parades, but whatever the make-up of the band, we know that John Distin was given a bugle, a keyed bugle and a trumpet to play.<sup>4</sup>

The difference in the technique required to play a bugle and a trumpet is not great, except that the register required for the trumpet is often much higher and therefore much more difficult. However, at the age of fourteen John was invited to play the trumpet part in a performance of Handel’s *Dettingen Te Deum* at a grand musical festival in Exeter in 1812<sup>56</sup>. Handel makes a prominent feature of the trumpet in this work, which celebrates a military victory, and while the trumpet part does not use the high tessitura range that Bach employed, it does require an advanced technique, considerable musicianship and confidence. The trumpet in use in Britain at that time was the slide trumpet which, with its spring-loaded slide and set of crooks was capable of full chromaticism but a very difficult instrument to master.

The South Devon Militia Regiment spent most of 1812 and 1813 in the north Midlands and an advertisement in the *Sheffield Mercury* shows that John Distin was engaged to play principal trumpet in the Sheffield Festival Orchestra<sup>7</sup> while he was stationed in the area. This is a prime example of the influence by military musicians on band development at that time, where professional military band musicians helped develop local community bands and orchestras. From a relatively early age, therefore, John Distin became familiar with the concept of professional freelance musical engagements and his role in the broader musical life of the country. At this time and at this stage of his development he would have gained valuable experience and knowledge about the British music profession and he must have realised from

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<sup>2</sup> Distin, Henry, ‘Our Portrait Gallery, Mr. Henry Distin’ *British Bandsman*. March 1889, p.132.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133.

<sup>6</sup> Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Herts.: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*,

his experiences that the skills he had developed up until that time were a valuable, rare commodity and something he would do well to invest time and effort into developing further. His emerging career opportunities, such as the ones mentioned, would, most probably, have helped form his ambitions.

The regiment returned to Plymouth in December 1813 and was demobilized in August 1814<sup>8</sup> and through a variety of unknown connections John Distin came to London and enlisted in the Grenadiers Guards' Band<sup>9</sup>. This was an important appointment to a prestigious position in an outfit that was considered the best in the country, at that time, and significant because of the strong influence professional military bands had on the developing amateur brass bands. Here, then, was a situation where an ambitious, talented musician who by joining a top military band, which was at the forefront of musical life of Britain, was about to ignite a whole brass band movement into life.

According to the *Musical Times* of 1907, 'British military music seems to have had its origins in the Grenadier Guards' and in 1794, only twenty years before John Distin joined, the band consisted of one flute, six clarinets, one trumpet, three horns, three bassoons, two serpents, a bass drum, cymbals and tambourine.

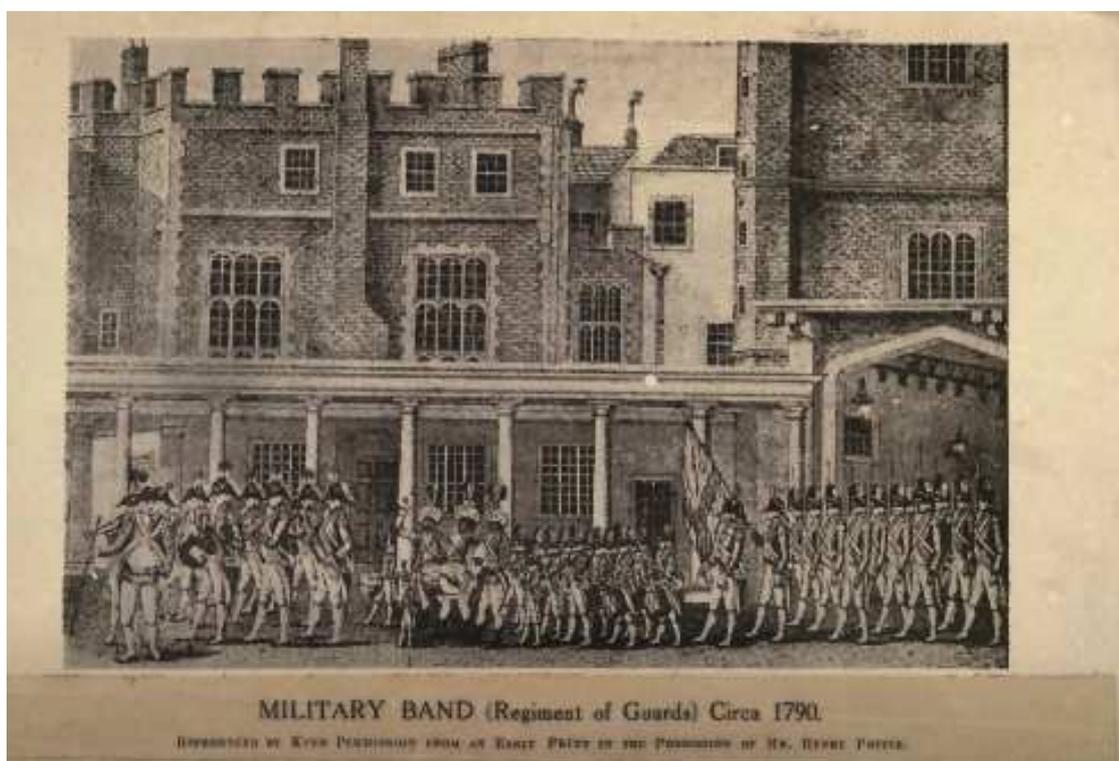


Figure 8: Band of the 1<sup>st</sup> (Grenadier) Guards at St. James's Palace 1790

Source: Farmer, Henry George, *The Rise and Development of Military Music* (London: W. Reeves 1912), p.1.

<sup>8</sup> Baron, Mike, Article on the South Devon Militia. See website: (accessed July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2009) <http://web.archive.org/web/20041014091653/http://www.familyforest.info/southdevonmilitia.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Distin, Henry, 'Our Portrait Gallery, Mr Henry Distin' *British Bandsman* March 1889, p.132.

The fact that, in 1814, a 16-year-old boy from the Devon Militia was accepted into such a select group of musicians indicates his remarkable proficiency as a brass player and particularly his abilities on the keyed bugle. With its newly developed chromaticism, it was no longer a simple tonic and dominant style instrument based on the harmonic series, but a sophisticated, complex musical instrument which John Distin also developed (see Chapter 5). Of his abilities the *British Bandsman* 1889 informs us that John Distin ‘achieved much fame as a performer upon his improved bugle’<sup>10</sup> and Horwood states, ‘with the Guards he was a distinguished soloist’,<sup>11</sup> while Dudgeon describes John Distin as ‘one of the most famous English keyed bugle players’.<sup>12</sup> John Distin was with the band of the 1<sup>st</sup> Guards when the allied armies occupied Paris after the Battle of Waterloo (June 18<sup>th</sup> 1815) where they stayed for six months, and the following account is given:

When the allied armies entered Paris, after the Battle of Waterloo, the band of the British Grenadier Guards was in the great column of soldiers that marched in review before the grand stand where the Duke of Wellington and the Grand Duke Constantine, (Russia) who had a keen ear for music, appreciated highly the playing of the Guards’ band, but was especially impressed with, and had his most lively curiosity awakened by, the keyed bugle played by John Distin.<sup>13</sup>

John Distin played with the Grenadiers Guards’ Band from 1814 until 1820 and during that time he fathered two sons: George Fredrick Distin who was born in Devon 1817 and Henry John Distin, born in London, July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1819. The mother is presumed to be Ann Matilda (nee) Loder who was already married with several children by her husband (Ridgway). In 1820 he left the Grenadier Guards’ Band to become a member of King George IV’s Household Band (formerly known as The Prince Regent’s Band) stationed at Windsor and perhaps because of his contribution to the development of the Royal Kent Bugle he received a special invitation from the Duke of Kent himself: ‘At the instance of his Majesty George IV (he) became a member of

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<sup>10</sup> Distin, Henry, ‘Our Portrait Gallery, Mr Henry Distin’ *British Bandsman* March 1889, p.132.

<sup>11</sup> Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

<sup>12</sup> Dudgeon, Ralph, ‘Keyed Bugle’, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 5 October 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Distin, Henry, ‘Our Portrait Gallery, Mr Henry Distin’ *British Bandsman* March 1889. p.132.

the private band of the King at the Court of Windsor as trumpet-player and solo bugle-player, a position he held, enjoying the especial favour of the King, until the monarch's death.<sup>14</sup> The bandmaster and Master of the King's Music from 1829 to 1834 was Christian Kramer and his duties included arranging and writing all the music for the band. He was also responsible for the recruitment of musicians and was often sent abroad to scout for good players. The *Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* (1825) comments on Kramer as; 'a musician of the very first order', and so these impressive credentials suggest that John Distin had been selected for the band by a discerning, eminent musician. The king, who was very musical himself, took a personal interest in his musicians and on one occasion enquired after Distin's absence from a performance, which was brought about by a sore lip. John Distin was regarded as the best keyed-bugler of his day and as a slide trumpeter he was also thought to be without rival:

Mr. Distin ..is utterly without rival in his mastery over the trumpet, perhaps the most intractable of all instruments. In his hands it is made subservient to every intonation; from the passage which starts the hearer like an electric shock, to the softest cadence. His execution is wonderful- brilliant energetic and thrilling; and anon, delicate, and smooth, and finished too, by, unquestionably, the most perfect shake we ever heard. His finest performance is, perhaps, his celebrated solo, the voice part of "The Soldier Tired". No one who witnessed it, and possesses the smallest appreciation of what real excellence is, can easily forget the effect produced. It is a performance full of true genius, and we were glad to see it acknowledged by the audience last week at the concerts given in the Athenaeum -room, in this town.<sup>15</sup>

John Distin was with King George IV's Household Band for nine years and during that time his 3<sup>rd</sup> son William Alfred Distin was born (in 1822) in Westminster, London and a year later (in June 1823) a 4<sup>th</sup> son, Theodore Distin, was born in Brighton, Sussex. In 1829 Ann Matilda's first husband, Thomas Edmund Ridgway died and on March 17<sup>th</sup> the same year she married John Distin.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>15</sup> *The Derby Mercury*, April 13<sup>th</sup> 1842.

<sup>16</sup> Marriage Certificate.

Scott states that Distin was released from military service after fulfilling his enlistment and settled in London playing concerts, teaching trumpet and bugle and assumed new duties as a family man;<sup>17</sup> however, a poster from 1843<sup>18</sup> confirms Distin remained principal trumpet of the Household Band for nine years. After the death of King George IV in 1830 the band members were dismissed Distin was made redundant, however, at this time, he acquired leadership skills which are shown in the following account where he assumes an authority on behalf of his peers in representing their cause for a better settlement:

The members of the band were called upon to give up their uniforms, which were very gorgeous and costly. The coats were heavy with solid gold lace in such quantities that they cost seventy-five guineas each. Through the instrumentality of John Distin the Lord Chamberlain not only withdrew the demands for the coats, but, in lieu of a pension, caused the members of the band to be paid from £250 to £500 each, according to their years of service. Distin sold the gold from his coat for twenty-five guineas.<sup>19</sup>

The dismissed musicians must have felt very insecure at that time and John was clearly at a crossroads in his life and so after six months teaching trumpet and performing as a freelance musician in London, John Distin accepted an invitation to the position of Bandmaster for the Marquis of Breadalbane at Taymouth Castle, Loch Tay, in Scotland, and in 1830 went to live there with his four sons.<sup>20</sup> The fact that John Distin's daughter, Louisa Rose Distin was born on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1831 in Gillingham Street, London, suggests that his wife Ann Matilda was not living with John and their sons in Scotland. This was a defining moment in the historical account of the Distins, as John Distin took on the responsibilities, for the first time, of a bandmaster, and reports of his activities in Scotland suggest his experiences from this time were increasingly related to the early development of British brass bands. John had arrived at a point

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<sup>17</sup> Scott, Jack, *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970), p.29.

<sup>18</sup> See appendix A.

<sup>19</sup> Distin, Henry, 'Our Portrait Gallery, Mr Henry Distin' *British Bandsman* March 1889.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*,

in his musical career where his brass playing had taken a new direction, which proved subsequently to have a relatively profound effect.

John Distin was based in Scotland for seven years (1830-1837)<sup>21</sup> (although most authorities suggest the period was only three years), during which time his sons grew up in a musical environment and it was during this period that the Distin Family brass ensemble evolved. However, while the family brass group was developing a repertory and a reputation, John was still in demand as a solo performer as can be seen in the poster below.

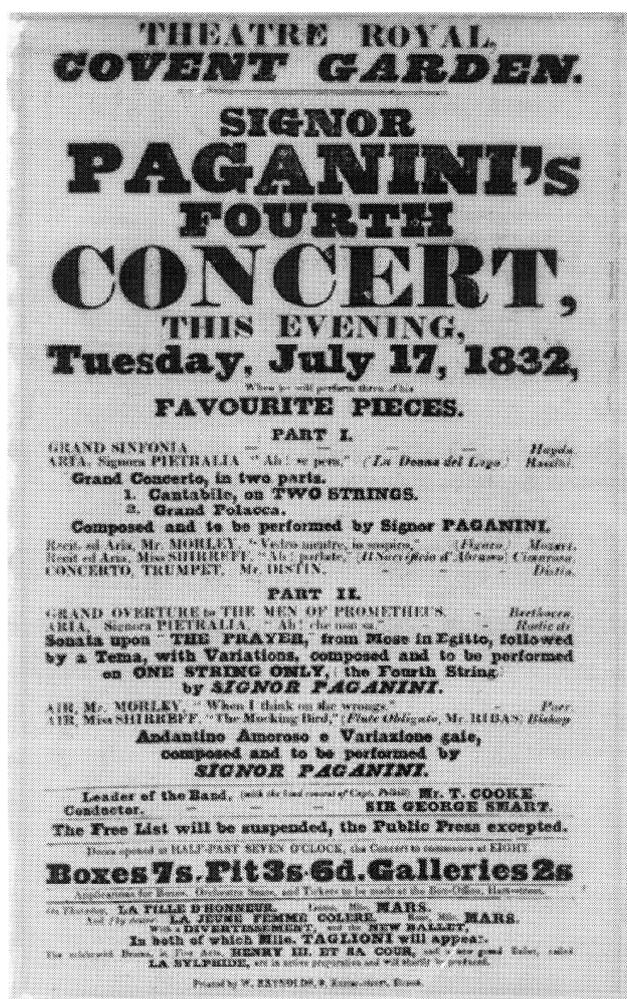


Figure 9: Poster advertising a Paganini concert where John Distin was featured as a soloist  
Source: The Royal Academy of Music, London (image reproduced under licence)

John Distin gave two performances<sup>22</sup> with the great Italian violin virtuoso, Niccolò Paganini, at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden London<sup>23</sup> where his solo item was *The Soldier Tired*; a piece

<sup>21</sup> Scott, Jack, *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970), p.29.

<sup>22</sup> See Poster July 17<sup>th</sup> 1832.

which requires considerable technique and stamina. The fact that John was appearing as a soloist on the same programme as an internationally acclaimed soloist, clearly establishes him as an important figure of the time. This would have been a well-paid, prestigious engagement and would probably have made a welcome change to his regular duties, even though transport from Taymouth to London would have taken several days by stagecoach, the normal mode of transport until the British railway system came into existence around 1840.

John Distin returned to London in 1837 leaving full time employment to the precarious existence of a freelance musician. It is not known why he took this important decision to leave his position at Taymouth Castle, but it is highly likely that John Distin and his private military band were made redundant as a result of economic restrictions. Marquis John Campbell sold parts of his estate in 1856, and the Scottish Library contains a catalogue of thousands of books for sale by auction from Taymouth Castle during the same time.

Queen Victoria (1819 -1901) took over the throne after the death of her uncle William IV (1765-1837) and John Distin played principal trumpet at the Coronation, which took place in Westminster Abbey in June 1838: 'While giving concerts at Willis's Rooms, Mr. (John) Distin was called upon to perform the duties of principal trumpeter at the coronation of Queen Victoria'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Poster July 31<sup>st</sup> 1832.

<sup>24</sup> *British Bandsman*, March 1889.



Figure 10: Queen Victoria's Coronation [June 1838] with John Distin playing far right  
 Source: Royal Collection Trust, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2012

Further evidence of John Distin's eminence as a trumpet and bugle player is to be seen in the dozens of press reviews in Appendix A. Besides his importance through most of the nineteenth century as a trumpet soloist, John Distin's significant contribution to the developing brass band world was as the leader of the family brass group. His experience as a professional orchestral and band musician and soloist would have served him well while developing the group's repertory, technical proficiency, performance style and entrepreneurial skills. He also passed on to his sons (especially Henry) his curiosity with regard to instrument design and technology, and although established as a foremost exponent of the keyed bugle and slide trumpet, he was never slow to experiment with new instruments, such as the cornet and later the saxhorn. After a long and successful career with the Distin Family brass ensemble John Distin found it necessary to reduce the number of performances, partly because of the success of the Distin instrument manufacturing company but also because he was losing his teeth. In 1857 a crowd of 20,000 packed the Crystal Palace for John's 'farewell concert'<sup>25</sup> where he played the trumpet part in Handel's 'Let the Bright Seraphim' from *Samson*, with Miss Rainsford as vocal

<sup>25</sup> Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

soloist. The writing for trumpet, while not extreme, is still regarded as a major challenge in the trumpet repertory yet even handicapped by dental problems John gave a virtuoso final performance: ‘Few men have made sweeter noises in the world, and now [has] lost, from great and continued pressure, the whole of his front teeth’.<sup>26</sup> Despite the poor financial returns from this concert<sup>27</sup> John Distin had no cause for concern as he was, in fact, supported in his retirement by a pension from the British Army with whom he had served for many years. In 1855 the first garrison or training camp for soldiers was established in Aldershot, and following John Distin’s promotion to second lieutenant by the 9<sup>th</sup> Devon Artillery Volunteers on 9<sup>th</sup> January 1861, accommodation and a teaching position was provided for him.

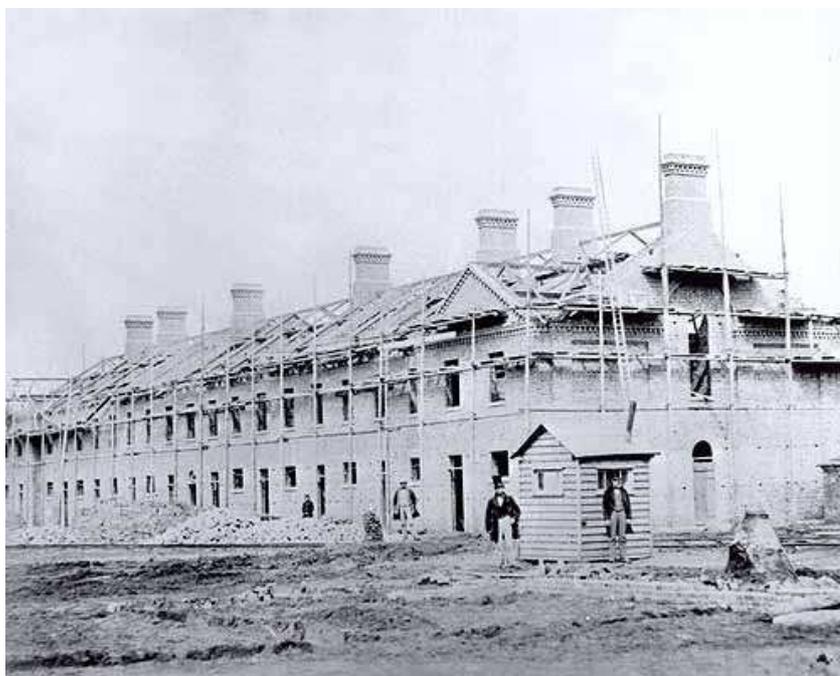


Figure 11: Training camp at Wellington Avenue, Aldershot, 1855  
Source: Aldershot Military Historical Trust<sup>28</sup>

This was a period of musical enlightenment for the British Army as Prince George, the Duke of Cambridge and a cousin to Queen Victoria, established The Royal Military School of Music at Kneller Hall, Twickenham in 1857 and so the Distin name is seen at the forefront of this development. For many years, just as brass bands were developing, John Distin had been one of

<sup>26</sup> *The Era*, January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1860.

<sup>27</sup> *The Era*, February 5<sup>th</sup> 1860.

<sup>28</sup> See website: <http://www3.hants.gov.uk/museum/aldershot-museum/local-history-aldershot/aldershott.htm> (accessed 23rd July 2011).

the most respected and admired brass performers of the period. As a soloist, a professional band and orchestral player, teacher and leader of the extraordinary Distin Family, he had been a pioneer in brass playing for most of his life and his influence, on a fast growing brass band community, was immense.

### **John Distin's wife and children**

Although John was not married until 1829, he fathered sons by Ann Matilda (nee Loder) who was married (as mentioned earlier) to Thomas Edmund Ridgway at the time. Ann Matilda came from a very musical family and she features strongly in Distin Family concerts as a pianist but before that, between 1808 and 1810, while still only aged 18, she performed at The Adelphi Theatre, Edinburgh as an actress and dancer. Generally, the Distin Family brass ensemble was promoted as a brass quintet, which negates the contribution of Ann Matilda as a piano accompanist, but one reporter describes the group as a 'family *sestet*', giving her position full status. Her playing standards appear to match if not exceed those of the brass players from this review: 'The Distins are a clever family, but especially Mrs. and Mr. Distin,'<sup>29</sup> however, Ann Matilda was not always credited for her piano accompaniments. Misfortune affected the family when she became ill, just before a planned trip to America in 1848, and from the death certificate we read, 'after a severe illness of 21 days, Ann Matilda Distin aged 57, wife of Mr. John Distin, the celebrated saxhorn performer died of a carbuncle.'<sup>30</sup>

John Distin and Ann Matilda's first son was George Frederick Distin, born in 1817 in Devon who, with the Distin Family brass quintet, played the bass part; firstly, on horn then trombone until settling on the baritone saxhorn; but the family brass group was reduced in size when, in 1846, George became seriously affected by an ear infection, then tragedy struck the

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<sup>29</sup> *The Musical World*, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1838.

<sup>30</sup> *The Times*, June 24<sup>th</sup> 1848.

family when on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1848, just prior to their planned American tour, and George died of inflammation of the ear's tympanum, aged only 30.<sup>31</sup>

The second son was Henry John Distin, born 1819 in Pimlico, London. He played natural horn in the family group to start, but later played the keyed bugle and the cornet before settling on contralto saxhorn. Henry became the most significant Distin family member because of his entrepreneurial skills, innovation and vision for brass instrumental manufacturing, publishing and the role of the brass band in society and much of this dissertation will be devoted to his achievements and significance. While Henry played an important role in the family brass group and the family business, it was when he took over the family firm in October 1849 that his influence was most strongly felt. He built up the instrument manufacturing company from humble beginnings until it was sold in 1868 for a large profit.

From the huge divergence of interests made within the music business we gain an impression that Henry Distin was a clever, versatile man with boundless energy. As a brass soloist he could effortlessly and confidently perform difficult technical pieces such as *The Carnival of Venice* and he could quickly adapt to most other brass instrument he might happen to come across, such as a new kind of horn or tuba. As a musical director he was clearly ambitious and resourceful, organising several highly successful brass groups, although his conducting skills may have been inferior compared to the successful band contesting conductors of the day. There are, however, instances where he displays a boastful nature particularly in publicising and promoting his various ventures, but this may have been acceptable behaviour in the nineteenth century. Beside Henry's boastfulness his business ethics are questionable at times and one cannot fail to sympathise with Adolphe Sax, for example, whose patents on brass instrument designs were invaded and whose contractual agreements were often abused. Henry Distin, in fact, registered a patent on a saxhorn before Sax, only a few weeks after returning from his first meeting with Sax in Paris.

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<sup>31</sup> *Death Certificate.*

Henry Distin's genius was in his perception and innovation which, together with his ambition and business skills, he utilised to make a successful business empire. However, while he probably never actually made a brass instrument he certainly knew what a good one was, and how to sell it. This intense, enterprising ambition must have been an inspiration to many aspiring businesses and indeed, fledgling brass bands and while his motives may well have been driven by self-interest and capitalism, his innovation, nevertheless, proved to be positively influential to a new brass band community. In 1876 following an illustrious career Henry emigrated to America and continued manufacturing brass instruments which are still highly regarded today by collectors, and he was also performing occasionally, as a soloist in his later years.

John Distin's third son was William Alfred Distin, born in 1822, Westminster London who also started his career on the natural horn in the family group before taking up the contralto saxhorn. William also composed songs that included *The United Volunteers*, which was published in London 1860, and he also 'found fame as a singer with a fine bass voice'<sup>32</sup> until he died in December 1879 in Southwark, Surrey.<sup>33</sup>

The fourth son was Theodore Distin, born in June 1823 in Brighton, Sussex and also started on natural horn in the family group before taking up the alto saxhorn. Theodore and William Distin frequently sang together in concert performances<sup>34</sup> and after a long playing career, Theodore became a professional baritone singer<sup>35</sup> appearing at Covent Garden in 1860.<sup>36</sup> He was a member of the Pine and Harrison Opera Company, an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music and he wrote several songs.

John Distin and Ann Matilda's youngest child was a daughter, Louisa (or Louise) Rose Distin. She was born on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1831 in London while the rest of the family was living

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<sup>32</sup> Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.34.

<sup>33</sup> Rose, Horwood and Bate, and Mitroulia and Myers however, claim that he died in 1884.

<sup>34</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 14<sup>th</sup> August 1860.

<sup>35</sup> *The Times*, January 1848.

<sup>36</sup> Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Herts.: Egon Pub. 1992), p.36

and working in Taymouth, Scotland. She appeared on some of the Distin Family concerts as a vocalist when she was quite young and later, in 1849, on the concert tour of America.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has examined the individual attributes of the members of the Distin Family who made a profound impression on the music life of Britain during the nineteenth century with their performances, instrument manufacturing, music publishing, etc. From the very many accolades for their performances and products shown in Appendix A, it is clear that the Distins were held in high esteem, but particularly important were the contributions made by the father John Distin as an outstanding brass player in the high register and as an iconic role model to a new society of brass band players. Also important was the significant work of the second son, Henry Distin, who built around him a brass empire that infiltrated many aspects of British musical life and shaped the future of brass bands.

The following chapters of this dissertation aim to show the breadth and significance of the Distin's influence on brass band development during the nineteenth century and in examining their legacy argue a case for the group being a seminal, motivating force.

## Chapter 3

### The Distin Family Brass Ensemble

#### Introduction

The earlier chapters in this dissertation have shown that the nineteenth century brought great changes and development to Britain and its cultural life. Music-making was, perhaps for the first time, a regular part of community life and not just a pastime for the upper or middle classes. Bands and choirs were springing up all over the country and their membership was predominantly from the working classes. With the imperative to organise themselves, in order to make full use of their newly discovered leisure time, bands faced the challenge of creating a new organisational style and an effective, balanced instrumentation which they had hitherto lacked. The Distin Family, which was well organized with a balanced ensemble, provided an essential role model for the developing brass bands. The professional military bands also provided a paradigm for the amateur bands but even they took time to settle on a complete and satisfactory instrumentation. However, with the advent of the new technology of the valve, both professional and amateur bands soon saw the potential for improvements. More to the point, with the mass production of brass instruments in all shapes and sizes, and at affordable prices, amateur bands, who wished to emulate their professional counterparts, found the means to become a more satisfactory, unified medium. With the example of groups like the Grenadier Guards Band (regarded as the finest wind band in Britain), the Distin Family brass ensemble (regarded as the finest brass band in Britain), and with the additional motivation of competition (amongst other incentives), 'brass banding' became an important, indeed germane, aspect of British life.

As mentioned earlier, the most significant reasons for the rise of the brass band as a concept and 'institution' were the introduction of valved instruments, the arrival of the cornet and the adoption of saxhorns played and promoted by the Distins. However, although these

influences were important, crucial to the initial development of the brass band movement in Britain was the influence exerted by the Distin Family ensemble and its performances. Having previously discussed the importance of the individuals in the group this chapter therefore, seeks to examine, in some detail, the vital importance of the Distin Family brass ensemble to the birth of the brass band and its later growth. This chapter also shows how the Distin Family itself grew from a quintet to a large brass ensemble evolved into ‘the most remarkable brass band in England’.<sup>1</sup>

Newsome explains that by the 1850s the Distin Family brass ensemble ‘had already given over 10,000 concerts!’,<sup>2</sup> and his exclamation mark confirms that the group’s activities were extraordinary. Some of its audiences were undoubtedly large; in New York in 1849, where the ‘grand concert hall had been newly ‘fitted up’ ... the audience consisted of several thousand people’,<sup>3</sup> and at John Distin’s retirement concert, held at the Crystal Palace, audience figures were reportedly 20,000 people. Evidence of the group’s immense popularity can be found in hundreds of reviews and many of these reports are listed in Appendix A, but perhaps the most significant commendation appears in *The Era* (April 1893) which states that the Distin Family was ‘one of the most successful instrumental ensembles in the history of Britain’.<sup>4</sup> It is important, though, to put these findings into context and also to present them in a balanced, objective fashion. Whilst the Distin Family brass ensemble was very successful and popular, they did not fundamentally invent the *brass ensemble* as such, and they did not create the concept of brass ensemble performance practice. These had been well established for centuries. However, as Horwood tells us, ‘Sax and his saxhorn, through the good offices of Distin, laid the *function* [my italics] of a virile brass band movement’<sup>5</sup> and so we should relate the success of the Distins to the development of the *brass band* movement and not the brass ensemble.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, March 25<sup>th</sup> 1867, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> *The British Bandsman*, March 1889.

<sup>4</sup> *The Era*, April 1893.

<sup>5</sup> Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy*, (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

However, before we examine some of the aspects of the Distin brass group – its instruments, music, performance style, presentation and popularisation, with the purpose of making an evaluation on its importance and impact on brass band development, it is essential to consider its position in musical history.

### **The Distin Family brass ensemble as a model**

When John Distin assembled his sons in Taymouth to play as a brass group he himself had a model on which to base his concept. Composers such as Giovanni Gabrieli (1554 – 1612) and Heinrich Schütz (1585 – 1672) wrote a great deal of music for brass groups and in Britain eminent composers such as Henry Purcell (1659-1695) wrote specifically for the medium (his *Funeral Music for Queen Mary* of 1695 uses four flatt trumpets and a drum) but serious brass ensemble performance was rare during this period and brass instruments had mostly been used by city waites and by military bands. As Herbert states, ‘prior to the nineteenth century there had not been a widespread tradition of brass playing in Britain.’<sup>6</sup>

While there were some obscure brass instruments in existence, the main instruments in use in Britain at the beginning of the nineteenth century to cover the musical tessiture of high, middle and low were:

- Natural trumpets and slide trumpets
- Keyed bugles
- Natural horns
- Trombones (known earlier as sackbuts)
- Ophicleides (following the decline of the serpent and the bass horn)

These instruments had rarely been used collectively and they played a largely unimportant role in the cultural music life of Britain at that time. While John Distin’s concept to form a brass

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<sup>6</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.7.

ensemble performing ‘art music’<sup>7</sup> may not have been completely original, the idea of such an ensemble was nevertheless very unusual and innovative. Perhaps more importantly, his concept occurred just as the boom in the production of brass instruments was taking place.<sup>8</sup> The Distin Family brass ensemble was formed at an opportune time in history and soon established a strong identity in a unique position to influence and lead a quickly developing brass band movement.

In 1830, while serving as Bandmaster at Taymouth Castle, John Distin taught his sons to play brass instruments, continuing a tradition that still exists to this day where such skills are handed down from father to son. The benefits of formal, academic tuition and training can often be expensive or even unavailable, but John Distin was already a teacher and a professional player and with the responsibility of parental guidance for his four young sons, playing a brass instrument was a natural pathway to take.

The boys George, Henry, William and Theodore developed their skills quite quickly on natural horns and were encouraged to perform in front of an audience. The first public performance of the young aspirants was in 1831, when father John Distin, Master Henry Distin and Master Theodore Distin performed at the Adelphi Theatre, Edinburgh; not far from their home in Taymouth.<sup>9</sup> Extracts from the Adelphi Calendar Project also show that on August 7<sup>th</sup> 1832 John Distin performed a trumpet solo at the Adelphi Theatre, Edinburgh and Master Henry Distin and Theodore Distin performed French horn duets. Soon after, in July 1835, the full brass quintet made its first appearance, playing at the Adelphi Theatre, Edinburgh<sup>10</sup>.

On Thursday evening, notwithstanding the rich entertainments spread out upon the boards of the Adelphi, the manager seems to have determined to enhance the mental banquet still farther, by making it something of a princely treat – namely, by introducing Mr. Distin, principal trumpet player from the private band of

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Art Music’ as apposed to military signals, sacred church music, parade music, folk songs, popular music, etc.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.17.

<sup>9</sup> See website: [http://www.emich.edu/public/english/adelphi\\_calendar/perfactr.htm](http://www.emich.edu/public/english/adelphi_calendar/perfactr.htm) (accessed July 2009).

<sup>10</sup> *British Bandsman*, March 1889.

his Majesty George the Fourth, together with his four accomplished sons, the eldest of whom is scarcely out of boyhood. These performers used keyed bugles, French horns, and a trombone, and the beauty and delicacy of the music elicited from these noisy instruments, created both surprise and delight. A divertissement from Rosini's (sic) opera 'Il Turco in Italia', a concerted piece from 'La Gaza Ladra' (sic), &c., were given with fine effect.<sup>11</sup>

One year later, on April 16<sup>th</sup> 1836, an announcement in *The Scotsman* proclaimed: 'Mr. Distin and his four sons beg leave most respectfully to announce to the Nobility and Gentry of Edinburgh, they intend giving a concert, under Distinguished Patronage, on Thursday, April 21<sup>st</sup>.<sup>12</sup> It appears that John Distin's plans from the outset, for his family brass group, would not be leading parades or performing at outdoor carnival events or providing music for dances, which was the normal function of an amateur band at that time. His concept was to perform as chamber musicians for the middle and upper classes of society in concert venues and as artists. This was radical, innovative thinking and daring in scope and, as discussed in Chapter 1, brass bands soon followed the lead provided by the Distins to seek patronage from wealthy people. John Distin's career, to that point, had included performances for the aristocracy and indeed for royalty, and he developed this idea for his brass group, a concept which soon became accepted as a model for brass bands to emulate. Amateur bands needed financial support in order to exist, and some sought patronage or sponsorship from rich industrialists or wealthy landowners who were persuaded that investment in the arts, and particularly music, offered rewards.

While the Distin Family was based in Scotland, Henry and William Distin both studied horn and piano for a short period at the Royal Academy of Music<sup>13</sup> and from their archives we

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<sup>11</sup> *The Scotsman*, Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> July 1835, p.2.

<sup>12</sup> *The Scotsman*, Saturday April 16<sup>th</sup> 1836.

<sup>13</sup> Distin, Henry, 'Our Portrait Gallery, Mr Henry Distin' *British Bandsman*, March 1889.

find a list of pupils<sup>14</sup> which records that Henry and William Distin entered January 1834 and left June 1834 and studied horn and piano playing.<sup>15</sup>

According to Russell, the Distin Family concert performances started in 1844<sup>16</sup> and Carse<sup>17</sup>, Langwill<sup>18</sup> and Newsome<sup>19</sup> state erroneously that the Distins first appearance was in 1837 but the evidence above shows that they began earlier in Scotland in 1835.<sup>20</sup> This was the beginning of the Distin Family brass ensemble career – a father and four musical sons, ideally situated in history, geography and society, to become pioneers in a new form of brass music-making and seminal to its development. The example provided by the Distin Family brass band, in terms of its virtuosity, its experiments with instrumentation, the introduction of new repertory and performance style, came to serve as a model for the up-and-coming brass bands.

## Performances

By 1840 the brass band as a musical medium, and as a concept, had been accepted into the vernacular of the British musical world, which is clearly to be seen in a contemporary report on the Distin Family brass band in the *Musical World*, which states: ‘as a brass band, it is certainly the finest we have heard’.<sup>21</sup> Several all-brass bands had been formed at that time and by 1832 the Cyfarthfa Band, and by 1833 the York Amateur band were active. If we consider the differences between the performances of the Distin Family and those of contemporary brass bands we see that the purpose and function were slightly different and, of course, the size and scale of the performing groups was dissimilar. Cyfarthfa Band and York Amateur Brass Band

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<sup>14</sup> From ‘A list of pupils received into the Academy since its foundation in 1822-3, together with a list of the subscribers to the institution’ published by the Royal Academy of Music in 1838, p.36.

<sup>15</sup> From the Royal Academy of Music’s *Committee of Management Minute book* for the year 1834, there is one indexed entry for the Distins: 30<sup>th</sup> January 1834 ‘The 2 Master Distins, to be placed under Elliott for piano’, p.6.

<sup>16</sup> Russell, Dave, ‘What’s Wrong with Brass Bands?’ *Cultural Change and the Band Movement, 1918-1964*. Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Carse, Adam, *The Music Review* Vol. 6 1945, pp.193-201.

<sup>18</sup> Langwill, Lyndesay, *An Index of Musical Wind-Instrument Makers* (London: Bingham, 1960).

<sup>19</sup> Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> *The Scotsman*, July 11<sup>th</sup> 1835.

<sup>21</sup> *The Musical World*, February 27<sup>th</sup> 1840.

numbered well over twenty musicians and their respective repertoires were also quite different. Bands of the day were performing a wide range of music in a variety of situations from dance hall music and parades to church services but even so, there were similarities, such as their repertory of arias, choruses and selections from popular opera. Similarly, they were both performing to an attentive audience (rather than simply fulfilling a role of background noise) consequently a fuller investigation into performance style and repertory has been undertaken in Chapter 4.

Around 1850 brass band contesting became an important part of a band's activities<sup>22</sup> and their repertory included more serious, dramatic works such as the some of the pieces performed by the Distins. The performance style of brass bands was also similar, emulating that of the Distins; after all, a contest audience was listening critically. Bands were widening their repertory to include more Distin-style 'art music' and found they had an appreciative audience and also success in competitions as a result of the inclusion of serious, dramatic works. Contemporary descriptions of the group directly compare the Distins to the brass bands of the day and from a host of other accolades made about the Distins there can be no doubt that their playing standards were very high, and with the arrival of band competitions, the values set by the Distins became the expected standards. The development of brass bands came, primarily, from a driving ambition to attain the performance standards which the Distins and other virtuosi had established, and the Distins led the development of brass bands at this crucial time of their evolution with repertory choice, playing standards, and performance style. The Distin Family was achieving enormous success with its style, repertory, presentation and artistic direction which was clearly appealing and popular, and so others organisations followed suit.

Rather than declining in stature or even folding when George died or John retired, the Distin influence on brass instrumental performance increased, driven by Henry's ambition; at

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<sup>22</sup> Herbert, Trevor, from feedback comments on this dissertation (June 2012).

first with the Distin Flugel Horn Union and later with the grand Ventil Horn Union, the Distin brass ensemble evolved into ‘the most remarkable brass band in England’.<sup>23</sup>

## **Distin Business Acumen**

The family brass group was generally known as ‘The Distin Family’ as seen in a letter addressed to the Philharmonic Society, June 1845.<sup>24</sup>

Sir

In reply to your polite note we beg to tender our thanks to the Philharmonic Society and accept their offer of ten guineas for the performance of July at yours on the 23rd inst. Perhaps you will be so kind as to give me timely notice of what number of pieces will be required.

Forever

Your most obedient

John Distin

*The Distin Family*

49, Manchester St.

Manchester Square

Throughout their career we see evidence of their advancement by utilising connections with friends and family members. Looking for work opportunities or business favours they would often be in contact with people who were in a position to help them directly with engagements or to develop their network of connections. Similar behaviour exists today of course, but the saying ‘it’s not *what* you know, but *who* you know, that counts’ was very much the way that the Distins ran their business. It is highly likely that John Distin’s early career advancement and appointment to the positions with the Grenadier Guards, George IV’s Private Band and bandmaster to the Marquis of Breadalbane were achieved by personal favour; of course, the benefits would have been mutual. Sometimes the business associates became friends as we see

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<sup>23</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, March 25<sup>th</sup> 1867, p.1.

<sup>24</sup> British Library Letters.

in a letter from Henry Distin to Enderby Jackson (1896)<sup>25</sup> which starts: ‘my old friend’. This particular endearment gives us a clearer insight into Distin’s relationship and close involvement with Jackson’s brass band projects.

As we have seen, the first performances of the Distin Family were in 1835 at the Adelphi Theatre, Edinburgh and this is where John Distin’s wife, Ann Matilda worked as an actress and dancer between 1808 and 1810 and where her first husband, Thomas Edmund Ridgway, was the dance-master at the theatre. It is therefore, highly likely that the first Distin Family brass ensemble performances at the Adelphi came about through personal connections and favours.

For most of his life, John Distin had been paid a salary whilst employed as a military musician and his return from Taymouth Castle to London working as a freelance, self-employed musician with an uncertain income was a bold move but perhaps born out of necessity. He had gained some experience in the music profession but at this time, with a dependent family, his professional business acumen needed to be sharp. From the letter John wrote in 1835 (see Appendix A), we find evidence of him utilising his notoriety in persuading members of the aristocracy to sponsor his family brass group, notably in 1834 when Henry and William Distin both studied horn and piano for six months at Royal Academy of Music (Lord Westmoreland assumed all the expenses of their education in the Royal Academy of Music<sup>26</sup>) and later we see their performances receiving similar support and patronage.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, we are not always told who the distinguished patrons are, but sometimes the sponsor is mentioned, such as the occasion in 1840 when ‘the performance was under the patronage of the Mayor of Newcastle’<sup>28</sup>. Patronage and sponsorship was, and still is, an important aspect to the survival of a brass band and the support gained by the Distin Family was a clear example of what could be achieved. In fact, some brass bands went on to attain near-professional status. The Distins were highly paid

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<sup>25</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>26</sup> Distin, Henry, ‘Our Portrait Gallery, Mr Henry Distin’ *British Bandsman*, March 1889.

<sup>27</sup> *The Scotsman*, April 16<sup>th</sup> 1836.

<sup>28</sup> *The Musical World*, February 27<sup>th</sup> 1840.

on some occasions and one benefit concert, given at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, London (June 1848) and attended by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, netted them £500, but not every engagement proved so profitable. On May 27<sup>th</sup> 1840<sup>29</sup> a report of their concert in Wolverhampton regrets ‘we believe that the expenses incurred were hardly covered by the receipts.’ In fact, from reports of Distin concerts the impression is very often given that the ticket sales (sometimes costing two shillings<sup>30</sup> - worth around £8 today) do not cover the costs of their fees and expenses. Furthermore, there is evidence that any profits raised were often given to charity: ‘Concerts in Limerick, Negah and Parsonstown netted upwards of £60 for charity’.<sup>31</sup> The financial profits of the group seem to be inconsistent and one wonders how the group could have survived unless, of course, they enjoyed private sponsorship from rich patrons. Henry Distin gives some useful information about the economics of their trip to Paris in 1843, ‘the Distins were glad to get an engagement at the Paris theatre, for one month, seven performances per week, for 3,000 francs, equivalent to about \$25 per week each.’<sup>32</sup> There was also a sizable gift of 500 francs that was presented to the Distins by King Louis-Philippe when they performed for him in Paris around the same time.<sup>33</sup> Also, when the Distins travelled to America in 1848 the contract was \$2,500 for forty concerts in the Old Park Theatre in New York, and on the same trip, a concert in Boston earned them \$500.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the well-paid engagements outweighed the poorly paid ones. It appears, then, that their economic viability was secured by a busy schedule of engagements which were mostly profitable, and some sponsorship from wealthy patrons. This insecurity would have motivated them to their best efforts in performance, presentation and also in their business acumen in order to obtain continued engagements. There are also some instances where their performances are promoted

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<sup>29</sup> *The Musical World*, June 4<sup>th</sup> 1840.

<sup>30</sup> See Poster Wednesday October 15<sup>th</sup> 1845.

<sup>31</sup> *The Musical World*, March 9<sup>th</sup> 1843.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>33</sup> *The Musical World*, January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1845, p.41.

<sup>34</sup> Distin, Henry, ‘Our Portrait Gallery, Mr Henry Distin’ *British Bandsman*, March 1889.

by themselves rather than by engagement as we see from an announcement in *The Times* of June 26<sup>th</sup> 1846: ‘Sadler’s Wells- The Distins (the original Sax Horns) will give a Grand Evening Concert on Tuesday, June 20<sup>th</sup>. Tickets may be had of the Messrs. Distin, at the sax horn depot, 43, Cranbourne Street, Leicester Square’. Amateur brass bands at that time were a long way from this level of professional style promotion, however the example provided by the Distin Family was established for them to emulate.

The Distins show a shrewd business sense by using their connections with colleagues, friends and relations to promote themselves<sup>35</sup> for example, the Royal Command performance by Queen Victoria in December 14<sup>th</sup> 1844 shows that the supporting group was Her Majesty’s Private Band with conductor, Mr. George Frederick Anderson,<sup>36</sup> and we know that he was related to the Distins: Anderson’s wife Lucy (Nee Philpot) had a sister, Fanny, who was married to George Loder, and Loder was the brother of John Distin’s wife Ann Matilda. Further evidence of using family connections is seen when the Distins went to Hamilton, Ontario, Canada in 1849. There, the mayor of the city was a cousin; John William Langmead Distin (1789 –1879), and so this kind of business approach, utilising personal contacts and family relations, became the norm and brass bands followed the Distin lead.

It is likely that the Distins had other income streams apart from their fees earned from performances. We know for example that they ran evening class tuition from their base: ‘Distin’s Amateur Cornet Classes assemble nightly, for the practise of quartets, etc, at Henry Distin’s Cornet Academy/ sax horn depot, 31, Cranbourne-street, Leicester-Square’.<sup>37</sup> John occasionally taught the trumpet and we know that George was in the jewellery trade and it is possible that each member of the family could have had other sources of income; nevertheless, the achievement of the group as a business enterprise was commercially viable and remarkably successful for the time.

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<sup>35</sup> *The Times*, December 15<sup>th</sup> 1844.

<sup>36</sup> Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

<sup>37</sup> *The Times*, March 20<sup>th</sup> 1850, p.1.

This remarkable business success was carried out by the Distins with entrepreneurial flair,<sup>38</sup> and the style of their business promotion was reflected in their approach to performance practise and to public relations. There are many examples of unsavoury boastfulness and some arrogance in the Distin style of promotion, but these traits have probably been adopted consciously with the aim of elevating the perception and reputation of the group. For example, an announcement in *The Times* (January 18<sup>th</sup> 1847) credits the Distins as being *professors*<sup>39</sup> but this title is probably self-appointed, and these exaggerations cloud the facts. Another example is when the Distins first met Sax and encountered his saxhorns in 1844, Henry Distin reports: ‘After the engagement at the theatre was over the quintette played one night at a grand concert given by a famous singer, upon which occasion they heard for the first time a new instrument called the ‘saxaphone’ (*sic*) played by a French artiste’.<sup>40</sup> This account shows several interesting aspects of the Distin approach to self-promotion because the grand concert, mentioned above, was *not* given by a famous singer but by the eminent composer, Hector Berlioz. They did *not* perform themselves at that concert, the new saxophone was misspelled and the French artiste was none other than the great Jean Baptiste Arban who played one of the first saxhorns. Also, the occasion was designed to promote the new works of Berlioz and the new instruments made by Sax, which included saxophones and saxhorns. Modern day etiquette would, perhaps, consider this kind supercilious arrogance distasteful, but because we see so much of it in Distin public announcements and the press releases of other artists at the time, the behaviour appears to be endemic to professional life at that time. Another example of boastfulness, and self-promotion, may be observed when the Distins first adopted saxhorns and made the comment: ‘without egoism, we were the making of M. Sax’ name as a manufacturer’.<sup>41</sup> A further example of boasting which clouds the facts is an announcement in *The Times* (April 30<sup>th</sup> 1847) which

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<sup>38</sup> Herbert, Trevor, ‘Victorian Brass Bands: Class, Taste and Space’ in Reynolds, G (et al), *The Place of Music: Music, Space and the Production of Place* (London: Longman, 1998), p.110.

<sup>39</sup> *The Times*, 1847 January 18<sup>th</sup> p.4.

<sup>40</sup> *The British Bandsman*, March 1889.

<sup>41</sup> Carse, Adam, *The Music Review* Vol. 6 1945, pp.193-201.

states: ‘The Distins, the original and only performers on the sax horns and sax tubas will give their highly attractive and popular concert’.<sup>42</sup> Announcements such as this could have been submitted to the paper by a misinformed reporter; saxhorns had been on sale for several years, but we see that the announcement also includes an advertisement for ‘Distin and Sons’ Musical Repository’; consequently the supercilious promotional style must have originated from the Distins.

For much of their career the Distins functioned autonomously but in December 1854 an advertisement in *The Times* shows them using the services of a secretary: ‘Distin’s Flugel Horn Union are now open to accept engagements for concerts in London and the vicinity. For terms apply to the secretary at H. Distin’s 31, Cranbourne Street, Leicester Square’.<sup>43</sup> Also, in June 1864, when the group was expanding further, we find that they had adopted an agent in Patrick Anthony Corri<sup>44</sup> who was the musical director of Weston's Music Hall. Corri and the Distins had previously worked together during performances by Distin’s Ventil Horn Union with nine instrumentalists. However, when Weston’s Music Hall decided to promote a series of performances of Bellini’s *Norma* in 1860 the Ventil Horn Union was expanded to twenty-five musicians and Corri, who conducted on those occasions<sup>45</sup> also engaged each of the musicians.

The Distin business acumen and promotional style was clearly successful and Henry Distin, in particular, continually sought innovative opportunities for his company, which he sold (on June 19<sup>th</sup> 1868) for a large profit. Brass bands today have been influence by the Distin promotional style and business acumen as we see from these examples:

- Grimethorpe Colliery Band: The world's most famous colliery band.
- Brighouse and Rastrick Band: The best and most consistent ‘public subscription band’ in the world.
- Black Dyke Band: The world’s most famous brass band.

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<sup>42</sup> *The Times*, 1847 March 17<sup>th</sup> p.1.

<sup>43</sup> *The Times*, December 1854.

<sup>44</sup> *The Era*, June 12<sup>th</sup> 1864.

<sup>45</sup> *The Era*, October 6<sup>th</sup> 1861.

## Changes to the Distin Family Ensemble

The picture below of the Distin family is a copy of a rare print belonging to me. It was originally part of a collection belonging to John Webb, and shows important detail about the Distins and their instruments (which is discussed in Chapter 5).



Figure 12: the Distin family group c1840 before their adoption of valved saxhorns  
Source: Print belonging to the author

Adopting an overview we see that the Distin Family brass ensemble of the five players, seen above, developed (despite the death of one member and the retirement of another) into the Distin Flugel Horn Union of 1857 incorporating select brass players from London. Then, following the Flugel Horn Union, came the Distin Ventil Horn Union of 1859, with nine players, which grew to twenty five musicians for performances of Bellini's *Norma*. This eventually became the Distin and Levy Instrumental Union and later, in 1867, the Levy and

Distin's Grand Instrumental Union<sup>46</sup> with around fifty musicians. The Distin Family brass group had evolved into 'the most remarkable brass band in England'.<sup>47</sup>

Henry Distin formed and directed<sup>48</sup> brass bands for various functions which were 'composed of the workmen employed in his establishment'<sup>49</sup> and one of these bands which was called Distin's Employees Band, took part in the National Brass Band Contest of 1861.<sup>50</sup> Other brass instrument manufacturers in London followed the Distin example of having an employees' band, and one of Distin's biggest competitors, Courtois, performed on Monday September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1867 as the Courtois Brass Band Union, when a notice appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* announcing:

'The Courtois Brass Band Union will perform a selection from *Robert Le Diable*, expressly composed for them by Mr. J. Waterson, B. M. 1<sup>st</sup> Life Guards. This evening (Friday August 16<sup>th</sup> at the Promenade Concerts, Covent Garden Theatre) Courtois Instruments will be used on this occasion – Sole Agent, Arthur Chappell, 45, New Bond-street, of who lists may be obtained'.<sup>51</sup>

The instrument manufacturers Courtois took the Distin Family concept and made a duplicate arrangement of the very same piece which the Distins had been performing since 1844<sup>52</sup> in a version made for them by Meyerbeer, the composer. Initial distain towards such unethical conduct can be discounted by the fact that this provides clear evidence to support the claim that the Distins were hugely influential to brass band development. Bands were emulating the practical model provided by the Distins with their own countless performances over thirty years or so, and through the constant process of experimentation and expansion of their ensemble to the point where a recognizable version the modern brass band was established. Further detail on

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<sup>46</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, March 13<sup>th</sup> 1867, p.1.

<sup>47</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, March 25<sup>th</sup> 1867, p.1.

<sup>48</sup> *The Era*, September 1<sup>st</sup> 1861.

<sup>49</sup> *The Era*, October 13<sup>th</sup> 1861.

<sup>50</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, July 24<sup>th</sup> 1861.

<sup>51</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, August 16<sup>th</sup> 1867.

<sup>52</sup> *The Times*, December 15<sup>th</sup> 1844.

the Flugel Horn Union and the Ventil Horn Union is given in Chapter 4 when an examination of the various instruments used by the Distins and other contemporary bands is made.

Throughout the career of the Distin Family brass ensemble there were many changes to instrumentation which shows that the group was, itself, evolving. But while the combination varied and the instrumentation changed there was a definite musical style and approach, featuring balanced, homogenic performances of art music and opera extracts, which remained constant. The most stable phase for the group was a period of nine years (between 1844 and 1853) when the Distins played their saxhorns.

## Conclusions

It is somewhat surprising that, in today's musical world, there seems to be little awareness outside academia of the achievements of the Distins compared to the importance given to Adolphe Sax. This general lack of recognition of the Distins' contribution has to a valuable extent been countered by researchers like Horwood, Herbert and Newsome, among others, who have acknowledged the Distins' influence as performers, instrument makers and publishers. For instance, Horwood states that: 'Distin and Sax were completely complementary. The beneficial effect of their association was mutual. Their combined influence on the British Brass Band Movement is a lasting memorial to them all.'<sup>53</sup> And Langwill acknowledges their great fame in their day when he writes, the Distins were heralded as stars wherever they performed and there are even commemorative pottery jugs (around 400 editions) to testify to their remarkable fame.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

<sup>54</sup> Langwill, Lyndesay, *An Index of Musical Wind-Instrument Makers* (London: Bingham, 1960).



Figure 13: A Distin commemorative jug dated 1845

Source: Belonging to the author

However, building on the initial academic recognition of the importance of the Distins by researchers like Horwood, Herbert and Newsome, the present project has unearthed much new documentation as well as discovering a number of important period instruments, scores and manuscripts that go a considerable way towards filling in the large gaps in our previous knowledge of the Distins, and which serve to confirm the fundamental character of their contribution to the development of the modern brass band culture.

Through drawing on this new evidence we have considered in this chapter the impact of the Distins by focussing on the development of the early brass band which were springing up all over Britain during the nineteenth century<sup>55</sup> and were copying, and even developing, the Distin model of performance practice. I have shown in outline that the Distins' contribution to the development of brass bands was highly significant in a number of quite concrete ways through the impact of their performances, their experiments with instrumentation which saw the group grow in size from a small ensemble to a large brass band, their innovations in band repertory,

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<sup>55</sup> Herbert, Trevor, 'Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement', in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.7.

and their business acumen and in the following chapters I aim to develop, in more detail, each of the areas I have sketched here.

## Chapter 4

### **The Distin Family repertory, performance and presentational style**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter has shown how the Distins influenced brass band development, in nineteenth-century Britain, by their individual and collective skills and attributes. This chapter examines and evaluates the influence of the Distins through their choice of music repertory, their standards of excellence in performance, and their approach to presentation and promotion. A detailed review of these aspects aims to explain some of the most fundamental characteristics of the Distins and also those of the brass bands at that time<sup>1</sup> by throwing light on the established musical concepts. Consideration of these issues will contextualize the group's musical identity and give a clearer understanding of the effect and influence they had on brass band development. The examination of the group's repertory, virtuoso style of performance and presentation aims to show the importance of the Distins in these respects, and the effects they had on a developing brass band culture from the nineteenth century right through to the present day.

#### **Distin Family repertory**

Music making in Britain at the start of the nineteenth century entered the Romantic era (1800-1890s) established by the music of Beethoven, Schubert and other composers whose music introduced a more dramatic, expressive style to that which had previously existed. During this period the form and functions of music developed, and the emotional and expressive qualities of

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert, Trevor, 'The repertory of a Victorian provincial brass band' in Trevor Herbert, *Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.117-132.

music came to take precedence over the impassive, technical tradition. Art music became, for the first time, accessible to the ordinary person and music-making was no longer an exclusive pastime for the upper classes. Furthermore (as discussed in Chapter 1) music-making became popular amongst the masses, and amateur community bands sprang up all over Britain<sup>2</sup>. The professionally organised groups and virtuoso performers, like the Distins led the musical direction and an amateur band movement enthusiastically followed.

John Distin, as a professional military bandsman and freelance musician, had been performing in a variety of musical idioms for many years before the Distin Family brass ensemble became established, and the musical style of the group clearly reflected John's accumulated experience, knowledge and expertise. The Distins played mostly arrangements of vocal music; well-known songs and operatic arias throughout their career, but occasionally they included arrangements of instrumental music in their repertory. At the time, there were few, if any, original works written for brass quintet and a list of some of the pieces played by the Distin Family brass ensemble is given in Appendix C.

As a trumpet soloist, John Distin became well known for his renditions of the famous *obligati* to arias such as Handel's *Let the Bright Seraphim* and Storace's *Spirit of My Sainted Sire* (from *The Haunted Tower*) said to be 'performed by him only!'<sup>3</sup> He gave numerous performances of these arias with various soprano singers, who accompanied the group on its concerts and tours. John Distin also became well known for his performances of 'The Soldier Tired' (from *Artaxerxes*) by Thomas Augustine Arne (1710-1778). This was originally composed as a virtuosic soprano aria, and was probably played in the original key on the slide trumpet with piano accompaniment, although some programmes and reports suggest he was accompanied by a band or an orchestra. For example, a performance July 31<sup>st</sup> 1832 where he

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert, Trevor, 'Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement', in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> *The Musical World*, May 11<sup>th</sup> 1843.

played in a concert with Paganini at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, London<sup>4</sup> accompanied by the Covent Garden Band. The music is programmatic and heroic in character, and would have contrasted well with the virtuosic performing style of Paganini and the piece, therefore, would have been very appealing to an audience. This programmatic, heroic music suited the medium of the brass band and reflected in the repertory which soon followed. Dramatic episodes from the world of opera such *Robert le Diable* and pieces such as Percy Fletcher's *Epic Symphony* with its *Heroic March* became one of the most important ingredients to the established musical style of the brass band.

When John Distin's sons began playing brass instruments, they started on natural horns, and because very little suitable music had been composed for this combination, special arrangements had to be made (see chapter 7). These arrangements were probably made by John Distin himself with the knowledge and understanding of the capabilities of his young boys, such as *The Echo Hunting Duet* which they performed in 1835 (July 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>)<sup>5</sup>. The Distins performed for the first time as a quintet, at the Adelphi Theatre, Edinburgh and a review in *The Scotsman* states: 'These performers used keyed bugles, French horns, and a trombone, and the beauty and delicacy of the music elicited from these noisy instruments, created both surprise and delight. A divertissement from Rosini's (*sic*) opera 'Il Turco in Italia', a concerted piece from 'La Gaza Ladra' (*sic*), etc. were given with fine effect'.<sup>6</sup> From the same article, we learn that: 'The piece which attracted most attention, was the symphonious old Irish air 'Gramachree' performed by Mr. Distin on the royal Hibernian horn, an instrument played only by himself'. *Gramachree* was written by an unknown author in 1787, and was often sung in a variety of versions such as *Maid in Bedlam*, *Molly Asthore*, and *Grai My Chree! (Love of my Heart!)*. This was a well-liked song in Ireland, Scotland and England, and the inclusion of this song in the programme, shows that John knew how to appeal to an audience. From the very outset of the

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<sup>4</sup> See Poster July 31<sup>st</sup> 1832 in Appendix A.

<sup>5</sup> *The Scotsman*, Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> July 1835, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*,

Distin brass group's career, we see that its repertory was based on adaptations and arrangements of existing music and mostly of songs. These adaptations were often made on pragmatic grounds; for example, the aria *Let the Bright Seraphim* was composed by Handel for string accompaniment but often performed at Distin concerts with piano accompaniment because string players were not readily available. *The Soldier Tired* version for trumpet was an adaptation of the vocal aria and the 'divertissement' from *Il Turco in Italia* and the 'concerted piece' from *La Giza Ladra* were clearly arrangements of extracts from the operas reflecting popular, contemporary musical taste.

### **The influence of the Distin repertory on a developing brass band movement**

While some details of the Distin repertory are lost we get a strong impression of their programme style and content from archived programmes, posters and reviews. Herbert maintains, 'the repertoire played by the Distins usually, but not always, centered on dance music'<sup>7</sup> but a list of pieces from programmes during their performing career, shows they played very little dance music and were rarely engaged to provide music for dancing. Their musical policy was determined partly by a personal preference but mostly by a commercial viability that dictated their repertory and programme style. This was because their livelihood was dependent upon their appeal to a select section of society (not the general public) and so the repertory of the group was of paramount importance in order to sustain, as they most certainly did, a full engagement calendar.

From the beginning of the Distin Family brass ensemble's career, John Distin had an understanding of what appeals to a select, paying audience and how to choose programmes without sacrificing quality. The first indication of programme style is from the concert mentioned earlier, in Scotland 1835, when the two small boys played horn duets and John

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<sup>7</sup> Herbert, Trevor, 'Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement', in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p. 42.

played a piece of music by Mozart described as a *Concerto*. Leopold Mozart *did* compose a Concerto for trumpet, which is extremely difficult to play because of its extreme high register, however, the Distin's piece was probably not a 'concerto' as advertised but a cavatina from one of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's operas. John chose a relatively simple but, no doubt, beautiful piece to show-case the efforts of the young boys.<sup>8</sup>

The Distins quickly learnt the value of combining entertainment with cultural art music and this combination can be seen in early band repertory which consisted mostly of arrangements of popular songs which had a similar programmatic and heroic nature; as we see from a list of items played at a band performance in Sheffield July 20<sup>th</sup> 1812<sup>9</sup>:

- *The Prince and Old England,*
- *Rule Britannia,*
- *Hearts of Oak are our Ships,*
- *The Duke of York's March.*
- and *God Save the Queen* (which was common to both Distin and band programmes).

As we see from the repertory list above, Distin Family programmes consisted mostly of operatic music and this type of music was also seen in the repertory of other existing bands of the day<sup>10</sup> such as the Cyfarthfa Band<sup>11</sup>. The Cyfarthfa Band was formed in 1838 by Robert Thompson Crawshay of Cyfarthfa Castle, Merthyr Tydfil and this extraordinary outfit had an illustrious career. This band's repertory was remarkably eclectic, especially for the time and while the band was unique in many ways there were aspects of its repertory which were shared

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<sup>8</sup> On a personal note in this connection: My own early playing career started as a cornettist performing simple duets with my younger brother, while my father played a brilliant showpiece in the same concert. Even though we were ages 10 and 8 we would get more applause than our father but undoubtedly this was because performances by *young* musicians have always had great appeal.

<sup>9</sup> Scott, Jack, *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970), p.29.

<sup>10</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in Britain 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.205.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert, Trevor, 'The repertory of a Victorian provincial brass band' in Trevor Herbert, *Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.117-132.

by other bands of the day. Their repertory can be divided into three very broad categories of pieces<sup>12</sup>: first, light diversions- quadrilles, gallops, waltzes etc.; second, a number of miscellaneous pieces; for example, Joseph Parry's *Tydfil Overture*; and third, transcriptions and arrangements of art music - including opera and religious works.<sup>13</sup> The similarities between the Cyfarthfa Band repertory and that of the Distins, who had been performing for a few years before the Cyfarthfa Band was started, are clear as both ensembles played pieces such as:

- Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable*
- Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*
- Rossini's *La Giza Ladra*
- Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*
- Gungl's *Cuckoo Galop*
- Bellini's *Somnambula*
- Offenbach's Selection from *La Grande Duchesse*

Mr. Crawshay bought instruments from Distin's instrument manufacturing company in 1860, and the Distin Family gave concerts in South Wales in 1842, however the two brass ensembles may never have come into contact. The duplication of some of their repertory shows a common preference for a style of music which is still popular today and several pieces mentioned above are still regular features of modern band programmes.

In addition to extracts from opera, the Distins would often include in their repertory popular songs and ballads of the day as we see from reports of their concerts<sup>14</sup>. In 1840 at Newcastle Theatre, for example, they included *Oh no, we never mention her* by Thomas Haynes Bayley (1797-1839) performed as a solo item. Songs like these were often presented in a novel way or played on an unusual instrument and in 1835 John Distin performed on the Hibernian

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>14</sup> *The Musical World*, February 27<sup>th</sup> 1840.

horn,<sup>15</sup> a rare instrument which is described in Chapter 5. In Glasgow in 1840 Henry Distin played a solo ‘The Light of Other Days’ from *The Maid of Artois* by Balfe on the walking stick cornetto, another rare instrument. The Distins’ performance practice, music policy and style of presentation are, therefore, shown to be leading the direction of bands at that time, especially in terms of repertory.

Concert organisers and programme builders were, and still are, often concerned about promoting *new* works for fear of poor ticket sales yet they also know that if they do not include new ideas in their programming they will eventually face ruin. John Distin was also aware of this and a concert review from Inverness in 1837 states: ‘The different concerted pieces, most of which we have not heard before, were done in a masterly style, and executed with the greatest taste and accuracy- Handel’s *Water-piece* was truly grand’.<sup>16</sup> While the music was unknown to the audience and a possible risk in an economic sense, the Distins delivered a high quality performance of an unfamiliar work that proved to be a success.

Original, *composed* music for bands was still to come and so arrangements and orchestrations were required, and throughout banding history conductors and musicians have put their hand to arranging, often with mixed results, from a necessity or desire to be creative.<sup>17</sup> (Arranging is discussed more fully in Chapter 7).

The Distins’ style of programming, throughout their career, was to present a variety of items; solos, duets, trios, quartets and full ensemble pieces which were performed with the intension of providing maximum contrast and variety. This concept has been maintained in modern brass band concerts which often feature two or more soloists from within the ranks of the band, and sometimes, like the Distins, bands will invite a guest vocal soloist to complement their programmes. While vocalists provided variety to programmes they also gave John Distin

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<sup>15</sup> *The Scotsman*, Saturday July 11<sup>th</sup> 1835, p.2.

<sup>16</sup> *The Musical World*, August 11<sup>th</sup> 1837.

<sup>17</sup> My father made simple arrangements for his two sons and I have also made special musical arrangements for my children.

an opportunity to display his prowess as a trumpet soloist in items such as Handel's *Let the Bright Seraphim* which has a notoriously difficult trumpet obligato. While the Distin Family was essentially a brass ensemble they frequently performed with piano accompaniment and the pianist would often assume the role as soloist.

John Henry was clearly the outstanding instrumentalist in the group, but Henry was the sibling with most ambition who frequently took the centre-stage as a brass soloist. When the group performed in Ireland, in 1839,<sup>18</sup> Henry played two solos: Mozart's *Oh ciel pietoso!* (from *Idomeneo*) on French horn and *The Light of Other Days* by Balfe on the walking-stick cornetto. In Chesterfield, 1842,<sup>19</sup> Henry performed the Bellini aria, *Meco tu Vieni O Misera* on the French horn 'eliciting loud plaudits' followed by *The Echo Hunting Duet* with his brother William.

Occasionally the Distins performed music of a more serious nature, as can be concluded from the report of their concert in Ross on Wye on August 30<sup>th</sup> 1842<sup>20</sup> where the programme consisted of a number of sacred pieces from the works of Handel, Mozart, Haydn, and James Kent (1700–1776).

Of special significance is a piece written for them by Prince Albert<sup>21</sup> which they performed on December 26<sup>th</sup> 1844 at Windsor Castle. Unfortunately this song and its arrangement, entitled *Der Orangenweig* or *The Orange Twig* have not been found.

Transcriptions of orchestral pieces and operatic songs were the staple part of the Distin's repertory (and also the brass bands of the time<sup>22</sup>) and pieces by composers such as Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini, Ricci, Auber, Storace, Bishop, and Balfe were typical of Distin programmes.<sup>23</sup> Of particular significance was the inclusion in their concert programme in

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<sup>18</sup> See poster for Theatre Royal, Dublin, 1839.

<sup>19</sup> *The Musical World*, April 7<sup>th</sup> 1842.

<sup>20</sup> *The Musical World*, September 1<sup>st</sup> 1842.

<sup>21</sup> *The British Bandsman*, March 1889.

<sup>22</sup> Rose, Algernon, *Talks with Bandsmen*, (London: Bingham, 1895).

<sup>23</sup> *The Musical World*, May 13<sup>th</sup> 1841.

Chesterfield (April 1842<sup>24</sup>) of the *Laughing Glee* by Vicente Martín y Soler (also known as Martini Episcopi Bracarensis) from the opera *La Capricciosa Corretta, o sia la scuola de' maritati* called *Vadasi via di Qua*, which lasts just one minute and was sung by all five members of the group. The humorous song is highly entertaining and is an example of a presentational style used by the Distins where they injected wit and humour into a programme in order to gain further popularity. This strategy of the Distins is a fine example of their influence on a developing brass band movement and has left a legacy which brass bands follow to this day. In fact, brass band concert audiences in Britain today, may also be observed showing a predilection towards light-hearted entertainment and humour in the presentation of their performances and often the compère will introduce items with a repertory of jokes and humorous comments in order to fulfil the expectations of the public. The repertory of brass bands has changed a great deal over the last one-hundred and fifty years, as one would expect, but similarities in repertory between early bands and modern bands are significant in that they show the roots of the movement and explain how modern brass band repertory was formed.

Enderby Jackson gives an insight into early brass band repertory with his detailed account<sup>25</sup> of the first brass band contest in Burton Constable in 1845 where Wolds Brass Band of York was declared the winner. They played a selection from Rossini's *Barber of Seville*, a piece which had been in the repertory of the Distins for ten years before this event. Wolds Brass Band had clearly followed the lead made by the Distins.

A regular feature of the Distins concert programmes was the finale, *God Save the Queen*, which was reportedly arranged with variations by the Distins. The National Anthem has been dropped only recently from most modern band concerts but has been, for many years, a feature that was similar to the Distin concert programmes.

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<sup>24</sup> *The Musical World*, April 7<sup>th</sup> 1842.

<sup>25</sup> Jackson, Enderby, 'A Memorable Day at Burton Constable' in *Musical Opinion and Music Trade Review*. (October 1896).

The repertory of nineteenth-century brass bands was wider than that of the Distins and while bands *were* playing serious art music they also included in their repertory the light, popular music of the day, and provided music for dances and for parades etc, which was something the Distin Family brass ensemble rarely did. The Distin's repertory and programming style gives an impression of aspirations towards 'art music' and culture rather than popular music for the masses and while their programmes aimed to appeal, the quality of the music was paramount.

### **Performance practice and establishing virtuoso playing standards**

John Distin's standards of performance, gained through a successful playing career, epitomised everything the group did, and his sons adopted those standards of excellence. Establishing ideals when there had been no immediate precedent for brass ensemble playing and with such imperfect equipment, makes their achievements remarkable. Herbert says, 'they imposed an impression of what virtuosity on brass instruments was'.<sup>26</sup>

After a performance in Berlin in 1846, Meyerbeer commented, 'Never have I heard wind instruments played with so much splendour, purity, and precision... nothing equals the grandeur of their style.'<sup>27</sup> Glowing comments from eminent musicians and critics built up an impressive reputation and perception of the group, which became considerably enhanced after a royal seal of approval was given in 1844, when King Louis Philippe 'did the musicians the honour to compliment them graciously on the excellence of their performance'.<sup>28</sup> During their visit to Paris in 1844, the Concert Society of 1828 presented the Distins with four silver medals and further royal commendations and plaudits followed, awarding the group enormous fame<sup>29</sup>. An entry in Queen Victoria's Journal dated December 14<sup>th</sup> 1844 reads: 'Mama etc, to dinner, after which

<sup>26</sup> Herbert, Trevor, 'Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement', in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, September 19<sup>th</sup> 1851.

<sup>28</sup> *The Musical World*, July 4<sup>th</sup> 1844.

<sup>29</sup> Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

there was some very good music by the Distin family, a father, and his 4 sons, played most beautifully and really touchingly on a species of trumpet or horn, called the Saxe Horn.<sup>30</sup> Favourable royal comments like the ones mentioned, in a strongly class-conscious society carried much kudos and the Distins benefited greatly, but perhaps the most significant and relevant commendation of the Distin Family's performances comes from Daily Telegraph (March 1867) which states that the Levy and Distin's Grand Instrumental Union was 'the most remarkable brass band in England.'<sup>31</sup> The high standards of performance established by the Distins in the nineteenth century have left a legacy which still affects brass band playing today and often brass band contest performances will achieve 98% or even 99% by discerning, critical judges.

### **Presentation and playing style**

The Distin performances mostly took place in concert halls to a paying audience; a situation which differed markedly from the brass band activities of the time which were mostly outdoors, performing to a non-paying audience. Even when contesting became an important part of the banding calendar of events, many contests were held outdoors and often hampered by weather conditions and distracting noises. The Distin Family performances were dictated by a formal behavioural approach and stage manner as well as a playing style, and as the content of their programmes was, in the main, operatic extracts there would have been a dramatic quality to their performance, intrinsic to the delivery of the music. Evidence of any semi-staging or theatricalities, however, is rare and so the presentation and playing style of the group, while on stage, would have been refined, polite and careful. They stood, using music stands, in a tight formation and addressed the audience between items to introduce the music in a serious, formal manner. Pictures of the Distins suggest that the dress code was always very formal whereas

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>31</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, March 25<sup>th</sup> 1867, p.1.

brass bands of the time were more casually dressed unless they became attached, via the Volunteer Movement, to a military outfit, where they would be in uniform and required to be disciplined and regimented. While most Distin audiences would be seated some concerts were given in the style of Musard, as shown in the example below.

CONCERT A LA MUSARD,  
WATERLOO ROOMS, REGENT BRIDGE;  
WEDNESDAY.

**T**HE DISTIN FAMILY  
respectfully intimate that their  
BENEFIT CONCERT  
will take place  
*THIS EVENING, Wednesday 31st May 1843,*  
(Positively their Last Appearance but One),  
when, in addition to the  
SILVER QUINTETTE BAND,  
AND  
MISS SPENCE, of the Royal Academy of Music,  
MISS FITZPATRICK  
will also appear.

PART FIRST

Quintette, "Ah che Forse" (Zelmira), *Rossini.*  
THE DISTINS, - - - - -  
Cavatina, "Stanca di piu," Miss SPENCE, *Marliani.*  
Solo, French Horn, Mr H. DISTIN.  
Duet, "Mira O Norma," MISS SPENCE  
and MISS FITZPATRICK, - - - *Bellini.*  
Air, Trumpet, "Oh no, we never men-  
tion her," Mr DISTIN, - *Sir H. R. Bishop.*  
Song, "The deep deep sea," MISS SPENCE, *Horn.*

Figure 14: Concert Poster  
Source: *The Scotsman*, May 15<sup>th</sup> 1843.

Frenchman Philippe Musard (1792—1859)<sup>32</sup> gave concerts to an audience that, literally, promenaded or walked around during the performance and this approach initiated a tradition (via Louis Julienne) which continues today with our series of Prom concerts, usually from the Royal Albert Hall.

Distin concerts generally contained a mixture of ensemble pieces solos, duets and trios and there was often some singing from the group,<sup>33</sup> and their programmes showed a propensity towards special, new or novel items which purported to be unique to themselves. On some of their programmes, an orchestra or a band had a supporting role, probably in an orchestral pit.<sup>34</sup> For example, on August 19<sup>th</sup> 1843<sup>35</sup> when the Distins performed at the Teetotal Concert in Glasgow City Hall, they were supported by the band of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment. The impression,

<sup>32</sup> Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998) p.12.

<sup>33</sup> *The Musical World*, May 11<sup>th</sup> 1843.

<sup>34</sup> See poster with programme in Appendix A.

<sup>35</sup> *The Musical World*, August 24<sup>th</sup> 1843.

therefore, is that the Distin Family was mostly performing as a special feature within a concert performance, and other items or acts filled the programme. Examining Distin programmes, it appears that the length of the concert was quite short; however reports and reviews often suggest that the concerts were two hours in duration. There may have been extra pieces, encores or lengthy speeches which introduced the items but this is conjecture.

The aspect of vibrato in Distin performances is interesting, although there is no evidence to show they used it. This singing approach used by modern brass band players is sometimes frowned upon by orchestral brass players, who maintain, quite correctly, that good brass playing should have a controlled tone, and vibrato, when needed, *may* be added. The Distin's were performing operatic arias such as Meyerbeer's *Robert toi que j'aime* from *Robert le Diable*, which is a slow, deeply expressive out-pouring, and all the critics expressed their delight at the performances. This suggests that to be convincing, the style must have emulated that of an opera singer using vibrato and my opinion is that John and Henry, being the upper register melody players in the family brass ensemble and the most frequent soloists, both used vibrato and the others did not. It is also my opinion that this *cantabile*, lyrical approach, using vibrato was established in brass playing by the Distins, and modern brass band playing style comes from this tradition.

## **Playing techniques**

The playing techniques of all the Distin Family members developed and changed during their playing careers especially when they adopted new instruments. Often new fingerings had to be learnt and sometimes new embouchures needed to be built, and as the new instruments they took up were often prototypes, they would have been difficult to hold until such things were ironed out in the design and manufacturing of the instruments. Henry Distin moved from the natural horn to take up the keyed bugle along with his father in the group, and doing this he would have

had to make stylistic as well as technical adjustments to his performance. A more lyrical approach was required for the chromatic, melodic lines he would be playing, which differed considerably from the limited collection of natural harmonic notes he previously played. Henry probably overcame the difficulties and challenges of mastering the awkward keyed bugle with the guidance of his father, but there is also a possibility, looking closely at pictures<sup>36</sup> of the Distins from 1844 (see below), that Henry may have shaped a slightly malformed embouchure, as the instrument should, theoretically, be held more horizontal.<sup>37</sup> The weight and imbalance of the instrument may have forced Henry to play with a ‘downstream’ air column.

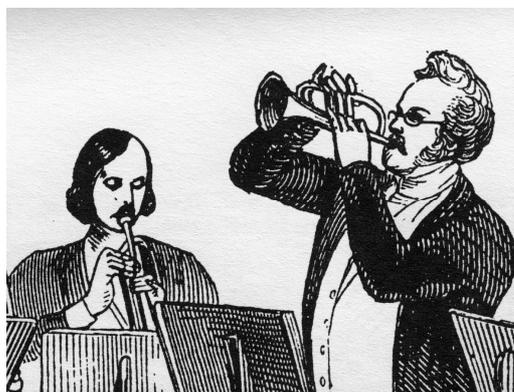


Figure 15: Showing John Distin playing left handed  
Source: *The Illustrated News*, 1844.

Henry on the left of this picture above, is playing his contralto saxhorn at a much lower angle to his father John on the right (playing an Eb soprano saxhorn) and this could be attributed to his early development on the unwieldy keyed bugle.

Another curious aspect about this picture is that most of the members are playing with the left hand, including the father John Distin. Sax *might* possibly have made some of his first saxhorns for left-handed players but details in other pictures of the Distins suggest that this picture must be either inverted or inaccurate. If the picture is inverted, i.e. back to front, it means

<sup>36</sup> *The Illustrated News*, 1844.

<sup>37</sup> Farkas, Philip, *The Art of Brass Playing: A Treatise on the Formation and Use of the Brass Player's Embouchure*, Wind Music Inc. USA. 1962.

that Henry played his saxhorn left handed, but other pictures show that he played the cornet with the right hand (see below). The keyed bugle which Henry played before taking up the saxhorn is impossible to play with the left hand.

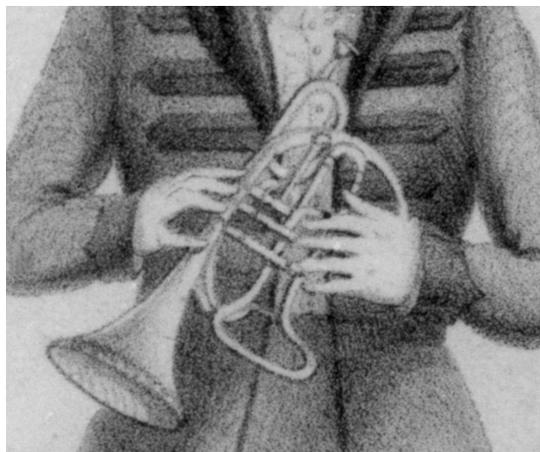


Figure 16: Henry Distin playing right handed  
Source: Print belonging to the author

The Horniman Museum Instrument Collection contains a silver alto saxhorn with rotary valves in the Adam Carse collection (number 723; see picture below) which was made around 1850 by Adolphe Sax and is engraved: *'The family Distin Ad. Sax e cie Paris T. Distin London'*. This instrument, probably made for Theodore Distin, is built to be played with the right hand controlling the valves.



Figure 17: An alto saxhorn (1850) *'The family Distin Ad. Sax e cie Paris T. Distin London'*  
Source: The Adam Carse collection, Horniman Museum, London



Figure 18: The Distin Family c1848

Source: Poster for a Distin Concert in at Brinley Hall, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA on September 7<sup>th</sup> 1849.  
Source: From The American Antiquarian Society (AAS), Worcester, Massachusetts (Licensed)

In the picture above Theodore (2<sup>nd</sup> from the right) is seen holding the right-handed alto saxhorn and John (left) is holding the Eb soprano saxhorn with right-handed Vienna valves and so the evidence shows that the picture in the Illustrated News (figure 14) is back-to-front but further investigation would probably be futile.

## Conclusions

This chapter has examined the influence of the Distins on brass band development in nineteenth-century Britain through their choice of music repertory, their standards of excellence in performance, and their approach to presentation and promotion, and I have shown that the influence was so considerable that a legacy has been left to present day banding. The innovative spirit and experimentation within the attributes mentioned, meant that the Distins were performing contemporary music, something which today's audience will only accept in small measure, and they were performing and presenting it in a new way. This pioneering spirit was inspirational to all who experience their performances and helped to shape a paradigm.

A consideration of the group's repertory has shown that the Distin Family brass ensemble had a propensity towards dramatic and lyrical operatic extracts and the programme content of its performances revealed a strategy of entertainment and variety balanced with artistic endeavour, similar to the majority of modern brass band concerts. Comparisons between the repertory of the Distins and contemporary bands, particularly the Cyfarthfa Band, as well as between the Distin's programmes and those of bands today, has shown many similarities, but significantly with the inclusion of extracts from nineteenth-century opera. An operatic stylistic approach is endemic to British brass band players even today, much to the consternation of brass players in other parts of the world, and this approach was established by the Distins.

Arranging was a major consideration in the repertories of both the Distins and early brass bands and will be discussed in Chapter 7. However, while the repertory of the brass bands was generally wider than that of the Distins, they *were* performing the kind of serious art-music which the Distins pioneered, as well as the popular, light music of the day. Distin Family performances took place, mostly, in concert halls to a paying audience, differing markedly from contemporary brass bands which played mostly outdoors to a non-paying audience, and while early brass bands served a different function in the music life of nineteenth-century Britain, the repertory, performance and presentational style of the Distins had a strong influence on the development and musical direction of bands at that time.

While the Distin approach to performance and presentation could be considered somewhat ostentatious it was probably deliberately applied in order to raise the profile of the group and create the best possible impression and reputation as 'excellent' professional artists with impeccable taste. The approach was matched by an attractive style of playing which became increasingly refined and homogenous, especially after they adopted saxhorns.

Taking all these points into consideration, my conclusion is that the innovative and pioneering performance style of the Distins not only influenced the developing brass bands in

the nineteenth century, but actually established a tradition which is still seen and heard in bands today. Successive chapters examine further influences by the Distin on brass band development.