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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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Part Two

Chapter 5

The Distin Family instrumentation and the adoption of saxhorns

Introduction

The previous chapter has shown how the evolution and growth of brass bands in nineteenth-century Britain were influenced by the repertory, virtuosity in performance and presentational style of the Distin Family. This chapter aims to show how the Distins' visionary concepts in brass instrumental development also influenced an emerging brass band culture which was developing quickly, following the arrival of the valve, the cornet and the saxhorn and how their experiments and choice of instruments also contributed to their success. I will show how the instruments used in the group affected the establishment of the brass band as an entity, and the standardisation of its instrumental line-up.

Chapter 3 showed how the Distin Family brass ensemble itself grew from a group of natural horns, to a large, sophisticated brass ensemble described as the most remarkable brass band in England¹ and this chapter examines, in some detail, the instruments they used. The modern brass band is essentially made up of cornets, saxhorns and trombones (plus percussion) and this chapter aims to show that the Distins, through their innovation in brass ensemble performance and experimentation with instruments, shaped the establishment of a settled combination for the brass band as it has come to be generally known. Their progressive attitude and open-mindedness towards innovation was a vital aspect to their pioneering work and while the motives of the Distins may not always have been charitable, or even artistic, their entrepreneurial ventures proved to be highly successful.

¹ *The Daily Telegraph*, March 25th 1867, p.1.

The instrumentation of the Distin Family brass ensemble 1830 - 1844

The Distins' experimentation with brass instruments and their successful presentation of various new instruments established the group as leaders in the field even before they adopted saxhorns. As previously mentioned, the head of the group was the father, John, and from the beginning of his playing career until around 1843, he played a keyed bugle and a slide trumpet. Although the valve had recently been invented and the cornet-à -pistons had been introduced to Britain in 1833², John had not taken up this instrument at that time.

The bugle (see picture in Chapter 1) is a conical bore brass (and copper) instrument pitched in various keys and limited to the notes of the harmonic series and was introduced to Britain around 1760. In 1810 the Irish bandmaster Joseph Halliday made significant developments to the instrument when he invented and patented the keyed bugle (5th May 1810 Patent No. 3334).³ This instrument had a practical range of two octaves, and because of its newly acquired chromaticism in the soprano register, it became popular and widely used in Britain until around 1850. After some developments the keyed bugle became known as the 'Royal Kent Bugle' and was dedicated to Prince Edward Augustus, Duke of Kent and Strathearn (1767-1820) who, as commander-in-chief of the military forces in North America and father to Queen Victoria, encouraged the introduction of the instrument into the British regimental bands during this period.⁴

When John Distin joined the Prince Regent's band in 1814 as solo keyed bugle player, he suggested to Halliday that he should add a sixth key⁵⁶. This was done by lengthening the instrument, which, with an extra key in the closed position, made the bugle a half tone lower but when open gave greater facility in most music keys. Distin added one further key to the Kent Bugle known as a 'clapper' key which facilitated the performance of trills.

² Rose, Algernon, *Talks with Bandsmen*. (London: Bingham, 1895), p.109.

³ See footnote 11 on page 51.

⁴ *The Bugle*, From Classic Encyclopedia. <http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Bugle>. (Accessed April 4th 2010).



Figure 19: A clapper key fitted to an early cornet
Source: Robb Stewart collection

Authorities on the keyed bugle do not generally subscribe to the contribution made by John Distin; however, it is clear that he showed a strong aptitude towards experimentation with brass instruments at an early stage of his career. John also played the slide trumpet, which was the standard orchestral instrument in Britain throughout most of the nineteenth century.⁷



Figure 20: A slide trumpet, Harper's improved model, by Köhler and Son, London, c. 1870

Source: Durham University collection of antique brass instruments

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

⁶ Russell and Elliot, *The Brass Band Movement*. (London: Dent 1936), p.56.

The natural trumpet, while limited to the notes of the harmonic series, was usually pitched in F, and came with a selection of crooks which when attached, lowered the fundamental by half tone steps. They were, and still are, extremely difficult to play. The slide trumpet, which was invented by John Hyde around 1799,⁸ was able to solve the problem of the ‘out of tune’ harmonics with a double slide return mechanism which gave the trumpet a few more notes and the possibility to correct intonation. The instrument was popular throughout much of the nineteenth century largely because it was used and promoted by the luminaries Georg Schmidt, Thomas Harper and John Distin.

From 1830 John Distin taught his four sons to play on natural horns, not the trumpet or keyed bugle; an astute decision, as the horn requires less physical effort and pressure than the trumpet and is more suitable for young, developing embouchures. Within a relatively short time the ensemble had developed a repertory of pieces suitable for performance on their unusual combination, but almost immediately they introduced new and novel instruments such as the royal Hibernian horn, an instrument played only by John himself.⁹ The Royal Hibernian Horn (or Hibernicon) was invented in 1823 by the Reverend Joseph Rogerson Cotter (of Donoughmore, Ireland) who received a Royal Dublin Society¹⁰ silver medal for the design of his tenor and bass instruments,¹¹ which were made by Thomas Key¹² of London with six keys and two water keys. The instruments obtained the patronage of King George IV and also the commendation from members of his private band as well as the conductor Kramer. As John Distin was a member of the king’s band at that time it is highly probable that he tested the instrument and was subsequently given one to play.

⁷ Webb, John, ‘The English Slide Trumpet’ *Historic Brass Society Journal* Vol. 5 1993, pp.262-279.

⁸ Herbert, Trevor and Wallace, John. *The Cambridge Companion to Brass Instruments*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1997).

⁹ *Ibid.*,

¹⁰ See website: http://www.archive.org/stream/historyofroyaldu00berr/historyofroyaldu00berr_djvu.txt (accessed October, 2009).

¹¹ *The Musical World*, August 11th 1837.

¹² Thomas Key was a noted instrument maker in the nineteenth century and his company is described as ‘Mus.Inst.Mkr to their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales, Duke of York, Kent, Cumberland and Cambridge’ and was based at 20, Charing Cross, London.



Figure 21: Douglas Yeo playing the Royal Hibernian (or Hibernicon) bass horn

Source: Bate collection at Oxford University

The instrumentation of the Distin Family brass group was somewhat unsettled and subject to experimentation initially, but this facet provided variety to their presentations and had a strong appeal to audiences. By 1838 the Distin family brass ensemble was more unified in form with a combination distinguished enough for it to have been described as a brass band: ‘Mr. Distin and his four sons commence their series of concerts on Monday. The performance of the music of Mozart, Rossini, Bellini, Weber, etc, arranged for a *brass band* will prove a novelty, and that of Mr. Distin and his sons not less so’.¹³ In 1839, Henry Distin followed his father’s example of exploring the potential of different brass instruments when he performed Balfe’s *The Light of Other Days* on the walking-stick cornetto which was said to have been invented by one of the

family. It was described, in a report of 1840, as Distin's Walking-stick Cornetto, 'played somewhat in the clarinet fashion, and was very highly admired'.¹⁴

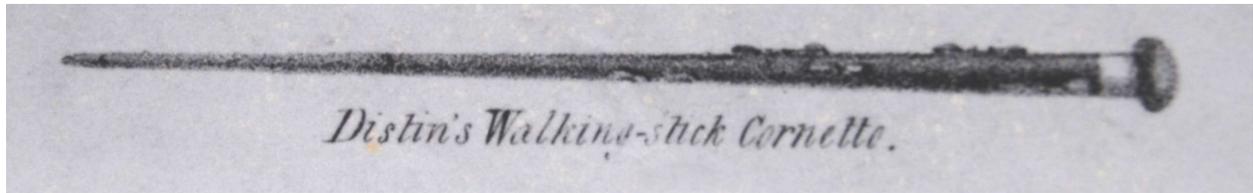


Figure 22: Distin's Walking-stick Cornetto - taken from a print of the Distin Family 1840c (figure 12)

Source: Print belonging to the author

Although John Distin is credited as the inventor and patent owner¹⁵, Langwill states that the instrument was made by the D'Almaine Company¹⁶ of Soho Square, London (1851 - 1854) but, in *A Catalogue of Musical Instruments Offered for Sale in 1839 by D'Almaine and Co., 20 Soho Square*¹⁷, there is no mention of a walking stick cornetto. A walking-stick trumpet is on display in the museum of the Royal College of Music, London and this is presumed to have been made by J. Köhler of 35 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London around 1840, and invented by Thomas Harper. However, Myers and Mitroulia state that the instrument was invented by Marcus Moses¹⁸.



Figure 23: Thomas Harper's walking stick trumpet.

Source: Royal College of Music, London

¹³ *The Musical World*, February 2nd 1838.

¹⁴ *The Musical World*, April 16th 1840.

¹⁵ *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, February 22nd 1840, p.2.

¹⁶ Langwill, Lyndesay, *An Index of Musical Wind-Instrument Makers* (London: Bingham, 1960).

¹⁷ Poole and Halton, 'A Catalogue of Musical Instruments Offered for Sale in 1839 by D'Almaine and Co., 20 Soho Square', *The Galpin Society Journal*, Vol. 35, Mar.1982. pp.2-36.

¹⁸ *The Distin Family*, *Scottish Music Review*, Vol.2 No.1 2011.

The natural horns used in the group initially had limitations, but despite this the performance of the Distin boys drew the following comment: ‘there is not a tone or semi tone in the gamut that they do not contrive to elicit from it.’¹⁹ The skill of playing a fully chromatic scale on the natural horn is today, achievable by only a relatively small number of specialists but in 1840, hand stopping, in order to obtain a full chromatic scale, was part of the normal horn technique.

Henry Distin was the most experimental member of the ensemble and often introduced new and novel instruments into the group’s performances such as the tenor corno.²⁰ Very little is known about his tenor corno or who made it, but similarly named instruments appeared throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. The instruments, which were constructed in a range of shapes, sizes and pitches, and described as operating in the tenor register, were probably in Eb or F and were played in the alto register. The confusion, caused by the Distins, is still common today, for example, the British ‘tenor horn’ (pitched in Eb) plays in the alto register while a European tenor horn (usually pitched in Bb) plays in the tenor register. The tenor corno, which Henry Distin played in 1842, was described as a permutation between a trumpet and a French horn and considering the adoption of the saxhorns just two years later, this instrument becomes highly relevant. From the description we may deduce that, like most trumpets it was forward facing and like a horn, or cor, it was mellow sounding. The introduction of the tenor corno (or cor as it was also described²¹) to the Distin Family brass group at this time shows a preference and a progression towards homogeneity in their ensemble.

¹⁹ *The Musical World*, June 18th 1840.

²⁰ *Londonderry Standard*, April 5th 1843.

²¹ *The Musical World*, May 4th 1843.



Figure 24: Forward facing tenor cor or ballad horn

Source: Birmingham Conservatoire

The Distin Family’s adoption of the cornet

The cornet (cornet-à -piston or cornopean) was first introduced into the Distin Family group’s performances in 1840, when Henry Distin played the instrument. Scott states that ‘by 1840, John Distin had [also] taken up the cornet-à -pistons in addition to the slide trumpet’.²² However, while there is evidence that John took up the cornet three years later (in 1843), there is no evidence support his statement. In 1840 (February 11th) at the Coffeehouse Assembly Rooms Carlisle, ‘the instruments used were: ‘trumpet, bugle, cornopean, cornetto, horn and trombone’²³. John Distin played the trumpet and keyed bugle, not the cornet, and considering the following glowing account he did so with consummate skill:

Led on by Mr. Distin on the bugle, from whose brazen throat he “discoursed most excellent music”- at times commanding the uncontrollable admiration of the audience by the richest bursts of harmony, and then gradually drawing aside the imprisoned soul by the plaintive and flute-like softness imparted to each note as it glided, almost imperceptibly, into the succeeding one. The audience were riveted with minute attention.²⁴

²² Scott, Jack, *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970).

²³ *The Musical World*, February 27th 1840, pp.131-132.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, May 7th 1840.

The report confirms that it was Henry, not John Distin, who first played the cornet in the group as John was still impressing audiences and critics in Southampton with his performances on the keyed bugle: ‘Mr. Distin, the elder, was formerly principal trumpet in George the Fourth’s private band, and his execution excels all we had ever supposed possible to accomplish with the instrument. His performance on the keyed bugle is rich in the extreme...Mr. Henry Distin on the cornet-à-piston. ..the applause was as great as it was deserved’.²⁵

Further confusion with the organology of the group is caused by a report of a concert (April 12th 1842²⁶) at Derby Town Hall where the group is described as a ‘choir of brass instrumentalists’ and in July 1842 after concerts in Worcester, the group is described as a ‘silver band’.²⁷ A similar title was use in August 1842²⁸ after performances in Monmouth where the group is described as: ‘The Distin Silver Band’ and later, in 1843²⁹ in Edinburgh they were announced as, ‘The Celebrated Silver Quintette Band.’³⁰

However, the instrumentation and character of the Distin Family brass ensemble changed markedly for its appearance in Glasgow 1843, when John Distin also took up the cornet: ‘The Distin family gave a concert in the Trade’s Hall on Wednesday evening. Nothing could exceed the combined effect produced by the five instruments – vis. two French horns, a trombone, and two cornets-a-piston – in the various concerted pieces, particularly the quintet from Balfe’s “Siege of Rochelle”’.³¹ The substitution of the cornet for the slide trumpet as the lead voice in the brass group would have made a substantially difference to the sound of the ensemble. The trumpet, with its big, bold, brazen tone would have dominated the texture of the group, whereas a cornet, with

²⁵ Ibid., July 1st 1841.

²⁶ Ibid., April 21st 1842.

²⁷ Ibid., July 7th 1842.

²⁸ Ibid., September 1st 1842.

²⁹ Concert Poster from *The Scotsman* May 15th 1843.

³⁰ Brass instrumental manufacturers, even to this day, are still experimenting with metallurgy for brass instruments but generally the metal found most suitable for brass-wind instruments has been some kind of brass alloy. Silver plating was an option used to protect the brass and to stop it tarnishing. A whole range of materials has been used in experiments including glass and even cheese! (Rose, Algernon, *Talks with Bandsmen*).

its light vocalistic nature, would have blended more with the other instruments. Furthermore there were, now, two cornets, giving the possibility of greater unity and also flexibility. The cornet was becoming popular with English brass bands at this time and by adopting cornets into their group the Distins gave the seal of approval to an instrument which is to this day a prominent feature of a brass band.

While the concept of an all-brass band was becoming established, the instrumentation for such an ensemble was far from being stabilized. Adding to the uncertainty was the confusion over nomenclature and classification of brass instruments, which was very unclear, and for various reasons remained so for many years. The cornet was quickly taken up by existing bands around Europe and soon replaced the keyed bugle because of its superiority in every respect. Wieprecht introduced it into Prussian army bands in 1833,³² the Coldstream Guards adopted it in 1837 and when the Distins took cornets into their brass group 'all others followed their example'³³. For amateur musicians also, the instrument was relatively easy to learn and to play, even for a man with little or no education and even a factory worker or a miner with tired and damaged hands could manage the three large valves with relative ease.

The origins of the cornet are not clear and there are several claims to its invention. According to Myers, the cornet, a valved version of the then popular post-horn, was invented around 1828 but Marcuse³⁴ and Montagu³⁵ agree that Halary of Paris made the first cornet with two valves in 1825 'and its popularity was immediate'.³⁶ According to Baines and Myers, no British patent was taken out on the invention of the cornet,³⁷ however, Etienne-François Périnet

³¹ *The Musical World*, May 11th 1843.

³² Marcuse, Sibyl, *A Survey of Musical Instruments*, (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1975).

³³ *The Musical World*, December 15th 1837.

³⁴ Marcuse, Sibyl, *A Survey of Musical Instruments* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1975).

³⁵ Montagu, Jeremy, 'The Cornet' *The Oxford Companion to Music*. Ed. Alison Latham. *Oxford Music Online*. (accessed June 1st 2008).

³⁶ Myers, Arnold, 'Instruments and Instrumentation in British Brass Bands' in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.174.

³⁷ Baines and Myers, 'Cornet', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed June 1st 2008), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

took out a French patent (number 4149) in 1829³⁸ which opens with the statement, ‘the cornet has been around for about four years, originally with only two pistons, a third has been added’,³⁹ which means that the cornet was invented in 1825, and most probably by Halary. Halary called his new instrument *cornet d’harmonie* and he supplied it with crooks from C to G and whereas, in France, it was known as a *cornet-à-pistons*, in Britain it was known as a *cornopean*, in Germany as a *cornett* or *kornett*, in Italy a *cornetta* and in Spain a *cornetin*. However, Enderby Jackson states that in 1814 the firm Griessling and Schlott (1808-1835) patented a *cornet-à -deux-pistons*⁴⁰ and adds that when the first British brass bands were formed in 1832 they were supplied with *cornopeans* made by L. Embach of Amsterdam⁴¹. Jackson also states that the first cornets made in England were made by Charles Pace in 1833.



Figure 25: Cornopean in C with *Stölzel* valves
Source: Durham University Antique Brass instrument Collection

³⁸ Myers, Arnold, *Historical Musical Instruments in the Edinburgh University Collection*. (Edinburgh University, 1990/2/3/4).

³⁹ Schwartz, Richard, *The Cornet Compendium* <http://www.angelfire.com/music2/thecornetcompendium/> (Accessed August 1st 2008).

⁴⁰ Jackson, Enderby, ‘Origin and Promotion of Brass Band Contests’, *British Musician and Orchestral Times*, July 1896, p.131.

While most descriptions of the cornet suggest that the variations of the name are simply a reflection of the country of origin, Myers maintains that there were small differences in design between the cornepean, cornet and cornets-à-piston; these were in the mouthpiece receiver.⁴² Some cornets were built with two valves, others three, and most valve systems were the Périnet design (see Chapter 1 for more on the valve). Cornets were made in an assortment of keys but settled in the soprano and contralto registers in the keys of Eb, C and Bb (with accompanying crooks to G).

According to Scott, the first appearance of the cornet in an orchestral score was in 1836 in ‘The Maid of Artois’ by the prolific Irish composer, Michael William Balfe (1808 -1870)⁴³ who was soon joined by other prominent composers of the day, also interested in employing the new chromatism of a treble brass instrument. These included Berlioz, Gounod, Offenbach, Saint-Saëns, Tchaikovsky, Sullivan and Elgar, but Newsome maintains that ‘the cornet was first called for by Rossini in the opera *William Tell* in 1829’.⁴⁴ The cornet-à -piston, cornepean or cornet had, by 1843, developed into a sophisticated solo instrument or as the *Illustrated News* describes it as:

One of those modern musical inventions of such beauty and excellence as would make Mozart (if he could resume his ‘mortal coil’ again) ‘list and be enchanted’. We think that the fervid imagination displayed by the author of *Il Flauto Magico* would have been quite wrapped in ‘empyrean ecstasy’ if he heard Herr Koenig ‘ducet forth’ that exquisite morceaux of poor Bellini, *A E O Cara*. Rubini was never more capable, even with the assistance of words, to produce a more beautiful effect. It enwrapt us in the highest enjoyment of seraphic art...The cornet à pistons is an instrument capable of the most touching expression, particularly in the hands of Herr Koenig, who is an *artiste* that imparts the ‘music of his soul’ to it, and captivates his

⁴¹ Patent numbers: Berlin 3100 and 3107.

⁴² Myers, Arnold, (of the Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments) in a private communication with myself (July 2007).

⁴³ Scott, J., *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970).

⁴⁴ Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* Ashgate, Aldershot 1998, p.36.

listeners by his own devotion. We sincerely hope that his benefit on Tuesday night was not a 'farewell one', but that we shall have future and frequent opportunities of being delighted by his matchless performance.⁴⁵



Figure 26: A cornet (with crooks down to G) made by Distin in c1862
Source: Belonging to the author

The Distin Family's adoption of saxhorns



Figure 27: The Distin Family
Source: *The Illustrated News*, December 14th 1844

⁴⁵ *The Illustrated London News*, December 25th 1843, p.348.

1844 is a milestone in the history of brass band evolution and even more so in the career of the Distin Family brass group, as this was the year the Distins met Adolphe Sax in France, and a collaboration commenced which changed the brass-playing world. While wind bands had been around for some time in Britain and all-brass groups were becoming popular, it was the arrival of the saxhorn that gave impetus to a movement from which thousands of brass bands emerged and as Rose puts it, Sax was the ‘inventor of the brass band’.⁴⁶

By 1844 the reputation of the Distins was growing and so for their important engagement at the Paris Theatre, where they played every day for one month, they would, presumably, want to present the best impression of themselves to a new audience. Wally Horwood, in his book on Adolphe Sax states erroneously that the instrumentation of the Distin group at that time was: a slide-trumpet, cornet, key-bugle, French horn and a Db trombone; however, at this time the instrumentation of the Distin group had progressed to a combination of two cornets, two horns and one trombone,⁴⁷ but whatever combination of instruments the Distins were using there were some mixed reviews of their performances and for the first time we hear negative comments about their playing abilities⁴⁸.

The various accounts of the Distin’s encounter with Sax and his saxhorns by Kastner, Fétis, Comettant, Pontécoulant and Distin are very different, however, from the various accounts and information gathered from the original saxhorn patents⁴⁹ and catalogue, it is clear that Sax exhibited his saxhorns in Paris at a concert organised by Berlioz on February 3rd 1844 at the Salle Herz. The Distins were present for the performance of Berlioz’s *Tristia* (op.18) transcribed for a six part brass and wind group where the saxhorns used for this performance were:

1. A soprano saxhorn in Eb played by François Georges Auguste Dauverné (Professor of trumpet at the Paris Conservatory).

⁴⁶ Rose, Algernon, *Talks with Bandsmen*. (London: Bingham, 1895), p.222.

⁴⁷ *The Musical World*, May 11th 1843.

⁴⁸ Comettant, Oscar, *Manuel General*, pp.53-54.

2. A contralto saxhorn in Bb played by Joseph Jean-Baptiste Laurent Arban (aged 19 and Dauverné's pupil at the Paris Conservatoire)
3. An alto saxhorn (with four valves) in Eb played by L. Dufrène (a Parisian horn player).

The Distins, having developed an open mind to experimentation with brass instruments by introducing new instruments into their performances, were intrigued and impressed with Sax and his new instruments and arranged a meeting with him the next morning. Another reason for the meeting was tied to Henry's growing desire to learn about brass instrument manufacturing and his ambition to start a London based firm, himself.⁵⁰ The outcome was; the Distins discarded the instruments they had previously used, and adopted a family of instrument made by Adolphe Sax. The claim that Sax actually *invented* the instruments, though, is vigorously debated. Despite the varying reports on what took place at the epic meeting between the Distins and Adolphe Sax the fact remains that both did rather well out of the association⁵¹.



Figure 28: The Distins with the five new saxhorns - left to right: George (Bb baritone saxhorn), Henry (Bb contralto saxhorn), John (Eb soprano saxhorn), Theodore (Eb tenor saxhorn), William (Ab/G alto saxhorn)
Source: Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Herts.: Egon Pub. 1992)

⁴⁹ Haine, Malou, *Adolphe Sax (1814-1894) His life, his work and his musical instruments*. (Brussels: Editions of the University of Brussels 1980).

⁵⁰ *The British Bandsman*, March 1889.

⁵¹ Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Herts.: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

While Sax *did* have plans to make a complete family of saxhorns only three were completed at that time. John took, logically, to the soprano saxhorn in Eb, and pictures suggest that he played the instrument held upside down in a similar way to which held his slide trumpet but this is because the new saxhorn was fitted with Vienna double valves (see picture below). Henry, being accustomed to a Bb pitched instrument took the contralto saxhorn and the alto Eb saxhorn was taken up by Theodore after his experiences with a natural horn (probably in F). Theodore would have had to learn the fingerings for a valved instrument, possibly for the first time, but there were no new saxhorns for George (trombone) and William (horn).

The valve system, used by Sax for two of these first saxhorns, was said to be the German Berliner pump, a short and wide piston valve designed by Wieprecht, director-general of the Prussian cavalry Guards band, referred to by him as *Stecherbüchschenventile*, and said to be an improvement on Blümel's valve. Wally Horwood is unclear when he states: 'The first saxhorns to come from the workbench were coiled trumpet style with forward pointing bells. Before 1848, Sax had adopted a uniform 'tuba' shape, even the smallest horn having an upright bell'.⁵² This event *was* before 1848, and Sax *was* producing the first saxhorns with forward facing bells and so perhaps Horwood meant *after* 1848. Either way, the Distin brass quintet now had three saxhorns and to complete the set they needed two more. They persuaded Sax, as a matter of urgency, to finish work on the large horn which became the baritone saxhorn in Bb and this was taken up by George. Having previously played the slide trombone George would have been obliged to learn a valved instrument, possibly for the first time.

⁵² Ibid.,

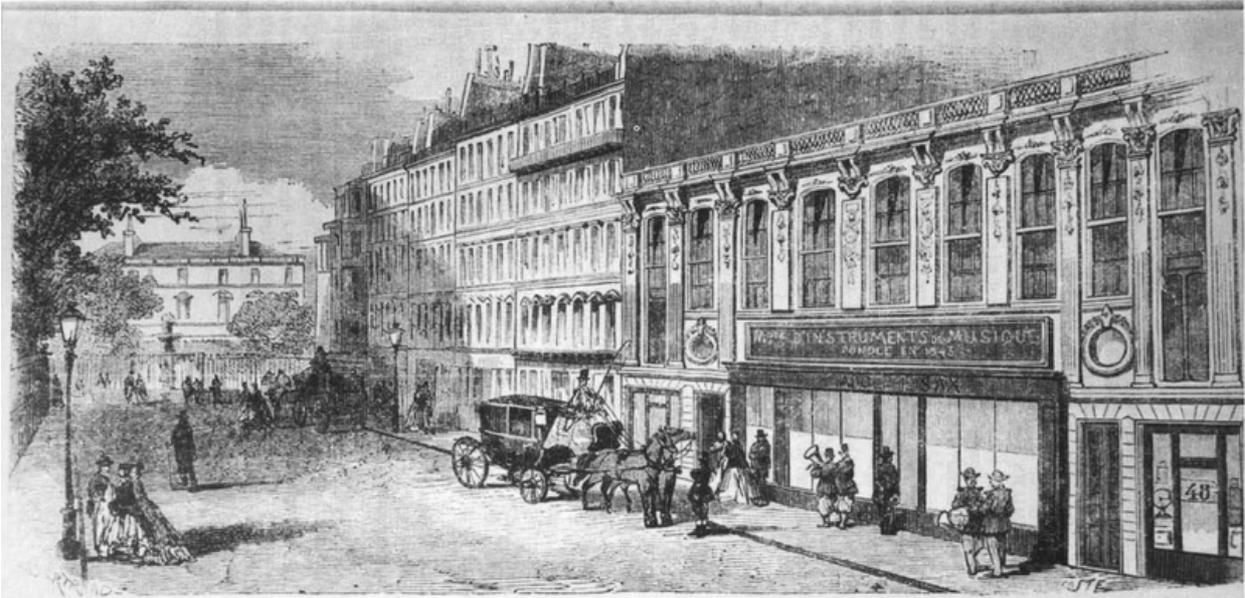


Figure 29: The Sax Music Instrument establishment in Paris
 Source: Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Herts.: Egon Pub. 1992)

Controversy exists over the fifth instrument pitched in Ab, which Sax supplied to complete the set of five. This was not strictly a saxhorn according to some, and is described by Scott as a flugel horn with Vienna double valves⁵³ and Horwood and Carse agree that the fifth instrument was a German or Austrian flugel horn⁵⁴.



Figure 30: Vienna parallel pistons which, according to John Webb⁵⁵, were originally called the “Systeme Belge”

Source: John Webb Antique Instrument Collection

⁵³ Scott, Jack, *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970).

⁵⁴ Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Herts.: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33. and Carse, Adam, *The Music Review* Vol. 6 1945, pp.193-201.

According to Arnold Myers⁵⁶ Sax also made this 5th instrument so in fact all five instruments could well fit the description of horns made by Sax, but perhaps the so-called flugel horn does not strictly fit the specifications of a saxhorn. However, Sax himself called it a saxhorn⁵⁷ and included it in the list of original patents of 1845 (see Appendix B) which shows the following saxhorn registrations:⁵⁸

- | | |
|--|----------------------------------|
| 1. Petit Saxhorn en mi bemol | (Small Saxhorn in Eb) |
| 2. Contr'alto en si bemol | (Contralto in Bb) |
| 3. Sax-horn en la bemol | (Saxhorn in Ab) |
| 4. Sax-horn en mi bemol a quatre cylindres | (Saxhorn in Eb with four valves) |
| 5. Sax-horn en si bemol a quatre cylindres | (Saxhorn in Bb with four valves) |
| 6. Saxhorn contabasse en mi bemol | (Contrabass Saxhorn in Eb) |

While the Distins did not take up the 6th saxhorn listed above, the contrabass saxhorn in Eb, the list of patents describes the two other instruments made by Sax (3 and 5) and these were probably the instruments taken up by William and George. The original patent states that the saxhorns were registered in 1845, however, Myers⁵⁹, and Newsome⁶⁰ claim that the saxhorns were patented in 1843⁶¹. The catalogue of Sax instruments⁶² also supports this date, but cannot be correct if Sax was still working on the baritone saxhorn in Bb for George in 1844. The error may have come from the date given in 'Catalogue of Instruments made by Adolphe Sax, Paris 1877 for

⁵⁵ By email on May 17th 2010.

⁵⁶ Conversations with Professor Arnold Myers in Edinburgh University, summer 2007.

⁵⁷ Mitroulia and Myers, 'Adolphe Sax' *Historical Brass Society Journal* Vol. 20, 2008.

⁵⁸ French patents number 2306. Date: 13.10.1845. Haine, Malou, *Adolphe Sax (1814-1894) His life, his work and his musical instruments*. (Brussels: Editions of the University of Brussels 1980).

⁵⁹ Myers, Arnold, <http://www.music.ed.ac.uk/euchmi/cimcim/itt/ittb.html> 26/08/04. (Accessed 3rd June 2008).

⁶⁰ Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

⁶¹ Myers, Arnold. <http://www.music.ed.ac.uk/euchmi/cimcim/itt/ittb.html> 26/08/04. (Accessed 3rd June 2008).

⁶² See appendix B.

the ‘first contralto saxhorn, manufactured by Adolphe Sax in Paris’ as 1843.⁶³ Either way Sax went on to produce saxhorns in a range of sizes, pitches and shapes.

Precise specifications and nomenclature of saxhorns from the very beginning of their creation was imprecise and controversial, and even Sax and Distins could not agreed on the exact nature of the instruments. The identifying character of a saxhorn is the ratio of conical to cylindrical bore⁶⁴ and so the main difference between a bugle (or a horn) and a trumpet (or a trombone) is the amount of taper in the tubing. Basically the bugle is conical and the trumpet is cylindrical.

While the saxhorn family of instruments were a new design in 1844, there were many brass instruments being ‘invented’ around this time, in all kinds of shapes and forms and the concept of combining conical with cylindrical tubing was bound to come. Consequently Sax’s new instrument would have failed to generate great excitement or recognition as a new invention. It was the Distins’ arrival in Paris at that precise time and their decision to promote the ‘new’ instrument that was fortuitous. John Distin claimed that the success of the saxhorn was more because of his family’s efforts than that of Sax, and that the family brass group was the making of Adolphe Sax’s name as a manufacturer.⁶⁵ Furthermore, that the name saxhorn was given at his insistence when Sax had previously called his instruments *bugles-à -cylindres*.⁶⁶ This name, of course, describes the instrument well; a bugle with cylinder piston valves.

While in Paris in 1844, the Distins practised on their five new saxhorns and performed on them for the first time, with enormous success, at a concert organised and conducted by Berlioz at the Opéra Comique: ‘The Distins had a real triumph when, on April 6th, they performed at the invitation of Hector Berlioz, at the Opéra Comique on ‘Adolphe Sax’s grand new invention’ their

⁶³ Ibid.,

⁶⁴ In conversations with Professor Arnold Myers in Edinburgh University summer 2007.

⁶⁵ Carse, Adam. *The Music Review* Vol. 6 1945, pp.193-201.

⁶⁶ Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Herts.: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

bell-forward saxhorns (soprano Eb, contralto Bb, alto Eb, baritone, bass, and counter-bass,).⁶⁷ The instrumental registers described are incorrect and Kochnitzky is also in error when he describes them as: soprano, alto, baritone, bass, and counter-bass⁶⁸.

Adolphe Sax was eager to promote his instrument as widely as he could and he was successful in gaining contracts to supply the military bands of France, Germany and other countries, contracts considered by some as a concealed monopoly.⁶⁹ At the French Industrial Exhibition, on May 27th 1844, the saxophone was displayed for the first time at a trade-stand on the Champs-Élysées in Paris, and the Distins were there to support Adolphe Sax and to demonstrate the saxhorns. The French king Louis-Philippe, who was visiting the exhibition with his aide-de-camp, General de Rumigny, Queen Marie-Amelie and two of their sons, took an interest in the Sax trade-stand and stopped to have a look. The Distins gave a short concert in honour of the royal visitors, who expressed their great satisfaction and invited the group to play for them at court.⁷⁰ The proposed performance was planned as one of the royal evenings at Tuillerie's Castle but, unfortunately did not take place. However, the king granted the Distins 500 francs as a token of his support.⁷¹ Later in the same year, Adolphe Sax engaged the Distin Family to go to Baden-Baden, Germany⁷² in order to promote the new saxhorn instruments and it seems that both Sax and the Distins benefited from the collaboration which went, 'from triumph to triumph' according to Horwood.⁷³

In October 1844, Adolphe Sax, trumpet player Joseph Jean-Baptiste Laurent Arban (1825-1889) and François Dubois (1837-1924), the trumpeter from the Paris Opera, travelled to London and performed on saxhorns at the Royal Adelaide Gallery in the Strand on October 14th 1844.

⁶⁷ Carse, Adam, *The Music Review* Vol. 6 1945, pp.193-201.

⁶⁸ Kochnitzky, Léon, *Adolphe Sax and his Saxophone*, (USA: University of Louisville; 4th edition June 1985).

⁶⁹ Bate, Herbert, Meyers. 'Saxhorn' *Grove Music online* ed. L. Macy 2007 (Accessed March 27th 2008), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

⁷⁰ Kochnitzky, Léon, *Adolphe Sax and his Saxophone*, (USA: University of Louisville; 4th edition June 1985).

⁷¹ Kastener, Georges, *Manuel Général De Musique Militaire*, Paris. 1848, p.248.

⁷² See Appendix A for posters and reviews on Distin performances in Germany during this period.

⁷³ Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

Arban had played in the original group when Sax's new instruments were presented at the Salle Hertz concert. This group of musicians, organised by Sax, were billed as the 'Sax Horn Band' and Laurent - a 'London cornet soloist',⁷⁴ was said to be their leader but this information is not accurate. Sax had been busy producing further saxhorns it seems and according to the report had also played in the 'band'. As Sax was a reed instrument player and not a brass player, this is unlikely unless he was playing his new saxophone. Laurent was one of Arban's Christian names, and probably not another person. These London performances, though, were apparently not successful and the small group cut short its visit and returned to Paris.⁷⁵

The Distins returned from Germany to England around the same time (October 1844) with the original set of saxhorns, and gave a concert in Brighton Town Hall ⁷⁶ where they presented their new saxhorns for the first time in Britain. Later in November⁷⁷ there were further concerts in Brighton Town Hall that generated the following report, 'The performance of Mr. Distin, sen., on the alto-horn excited some surprise among the musicians in Paris'. The reporter is probably mistaken; John Distin played the soprano saxhorn not the alto-horn and should have given credit to Sax and his saxhorn (unless the reporter was commenting on John's natural trumpet performance at the Conservatoire). Further misrepresentation occurs when a reporter from the *Illustrated London News* of December 7th 1844⁷⁸ claims that the saxhorns 'now used by them, are silver, and were presented to them by Louis Philippe.'⁷⁹ This report supports the misconception that the Sax instruments were actually presented to them by the French king Louis Philippe and this misunderstanding lasted for several years, compounded by statements such as, 'they will perform on the Silver Sax Horns, presented to them in Paris, after performing to his Majesty the

⁷⁴ Scott, Jack, *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970).

⁷⁵ Although I cannot prove it, I suspect that the Distin Family who had returned from Germany at this time (October 14th), may not have supported the performance by Sax, Arban and Dubois on what they had come to regard as *their* saxhorns.

⁷⁶ *The Musical World*, November 7th 1844.

⁷⁷ *The Musical World*, December 5th 1844.

⁷⁸ *The Illustrated London News*, December 7th 1844, p.365.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*,

King of the French'. Reporters understandably fall into the grammatical misconception and a similar statement made in the *Musical World* compounds the confusion: 'When the Distin family, a short time since, were engaged to play at the concerts of M. Jullien, they announced their performance for the first time on instruments which had been presented to them by his Majesty King Louis-Philippe'.⁸⁰

Soon after the adoption of the saxhorns, a controversy arose that soured the relationship between the Distins and Adolphe Sax. *The Musical World* explains: 'The Julienne concerts were very popular and well received. The name Saxhorn was not used in connection with Distin's concert, as had been the earlier case with the concert by Sax. Julienne's manager would not allow the name Saxhorn to be used for they had been played in the Adelphi Gallery and proved a failure.'⁸¹ It was an unfortunate irony for Sax that the English introduction of his own instruments built under the name saxhorn, should prove unsuccessful whereas the performance on the unnamed saxhorns was highly successful.⁸² The controversy provoked an exchange of letters in the *Musical World* when a 'Foreign Visitor Resident in London' likely to have been Adolphe Sax himself, wrote:

It appears to me that as a mere matter of justice, the Messrs. Distin should have the public know that the instruments called Saxhorns on which they were about to play, were the invention of M. Sax, by whose influence they (the Messrs. Distin) were enabled to perform before the King of the French, who presented them five hundred francs for their pains. One of these instruments (Saxhorns) was offered in person by M. Sax to his Royal Highness Prince Albert who honoured M. Sax by accepting it. These things should be made known, in justice to an artist of very great talent, and most unpretending manners.⁸³

⁸⁰ *The Musical World*, January 23rd 1845, p.41.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, February 13th 1845, p.76.

⁸² Scott, J. *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970).

⁸³ *The Musical World*, January 23rd 1845, p.41.

John Distin, replying from 6, Foley Place, Great Portland Street, London wrote in a tone described by Mitroulia as ‘hostile’:

When we were engaged by M. Jullien to perform at Covent Garden we particularly requested M. Sax’s name to be mentioned and to call the instruments ‘Saxhorns’. (The name which we gave them, as M. Sax thought of calling them cylinder Bugles). But the party who had their arrangement of these concerts said the name of Saxhorns should be omitted, as they had already (previous to our visit to London) been played by some parties at the Adelaide Gallery, and proved a failure. It will be seen that it was not by our wish that the name of Sax was left out of these bills, we never on any occasion omitted his name in our concert bills... We were the first who successfully introduced these instruments to the public in Paris – we played at all the principal concerts throughout the season. During this time we assisted and perfected the tenor and bass instruments, making the set complete; and performed at the great concert of M. Berlioz at the Opéra Comique and received the only encore during the concert. As a proof of our success we were presented with a silver medal by the ‘Conservatoire Royal de Musique’ and ‘Society of Fine Arts’; and; without egotism, we were the making of M. Sax’s name as a manufacturer. We performed before His Majesty King Louis Philippe through the interest of General de Rumigny. His Majesty conversed with us for some time and said, ‘I am delighted with your performance; I never expected to hear such beautiful sounds from such instruments. I return you my best thanks for the pleasure you have afforded me. Are the instruments of English manufacture? We answered, ‘No, your Majesty; they are the invention of M. Sax’- at the same time turning around and introducing M. Sax to His Majesty instead of M. Sax introducing us to him as the ‘Foreign Visitor Resident in London’ asserts. The King certainly did, as is stated, send us a present of 500 francs, and to M. Sax a considerable sum, as we understood, to reimburse him for the instruments. It is our intention to do every justice to M. Sax.⁸⁴

From this heated, open discussion, several issues arise but the main crux is clear; the Distins maintain that they intended to promote the saxhorns at their performance at Covent Garden but were forbidden to do so by the entrepreneur. Sax was understandably angry fearing a

⁸⁴ Mitroulia, Eugenia and Myers, Arnold, ‘The Distin Family as Instrument Makers and Dealers 1845-1874’. *Scottish Music Review*, Vol. 2, No 1 (2011).

negative effect on his reputation, and directed his fury at the Distins. Equally concerned about their public image, the Distins' response aimed to make amends to Sax by praising his instruments, but at the same time used the incident to raise their profile. On this occasion, and others which followed, the Distins actions and behaviour towards Sax appears unethical, and there are even examples where the Distins attempt to claim ownership of the new instruments, disregarding the contribution of Sax, but unfortunately for the Distins, the instruments were named after their maker. The Distins and Sax appear to have reconciled their differences, at that time, and formed an alliance in 1845 for the saxhorns to be solely distributed by Distin.

The Distin Family brass ensemble was in great demand for the next few years but unfortunately, in 1848, George Distin died, and so for the group's year-long tour to America the members hastily rearranged their repertory for brass quartet.⁸⁵ Horwood states that William, who had been playing the flugel horn, took up the bass saxhorn⁸⁶ however, this is incorrect as the instrument used in the group was the baritone saxhorn, not the bass saxhorn. From 1844 until 1851 the Distins performed on their saxhorns around the world for royalty in small gatherings as well as huge crowds, in thousands of concerts. Their impact on the music world was enormous and they became international celebrities. The saxhorns, too, became enormously popular and were eagerly taken up by Britain's developing brass bands.⁸⁷

Further instrumental developments within the Distin Family group

From the reports and reviews of the Distin Family's performances we are given the impression that the Distins were delighted with their new saxhorns, yet there is evidence that they felt a need to change and improve them⁸⁸. John Distin, for example, had the mouth-pipe altered on his soprano saxhorn so that he could play the instrument with his trumpet mouthpiece. The length,

⁸⁵ Langwill, Lyndesay, *An Index of Musical Wind-Instrument Makers* (London: Bingham, 1960).

⁸⁶ Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Herts.: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

⁸⁷ Bate, Philip, *The Trumpet and Trombone An outline of their history, development and construction*. (London: Ernest Benn Ltd. 1966), p.164.

back-bore and cup shape on mouthpieces for trumpets, cornets and saxhorns is substantially different, even today and John Distin's decision to use his trumpet mouthpiece in a saxhorn would have altered the sound from the intended one for that instrument. However, comfort and ease while performing in the higher register are paramount and because no tradition of soprano saxhorn playing, style and sound had hitherto been established, John was at liberty to make such changes without recrimination.

Along with the desire to 'improve' their saxhorns, the Distins continued to expand their range of instruments in their performances and one particular brass instrument appears, curiously, on just two occasions during performances in Liverpool⁸⁹ (October 1845) where Henry Distin performed a solo on a 'Sax's improved Clavicorn'.



Figure 31: A Clavicorn

Source: Horn-u-Copia. An internet Forum dedicated to gaining knowledge about all brands of antique, obscure and out of production brass instruments of all ages.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ *The Illustrated London News*, December 7th 1844, p.365.

⁸⁹ See Poster for Wednesday October 15th 1845. Liverpool. (Appendix A).

⁹⁰ <http://www.horn-u-copia.net>



Figure 32: A commemorative jug from the Distin concert in Liverpool 1845
 - on the right: Henry Distin holding a clavicor
 Source: Jug belonging to the author

The clavicor was used (and is still used occasionally) in opera orchestras and some amateur bands also adopted this instrument; however, it did not find general favour. From 1833 the cornet became a preferred instrument in bands for the soprano register (as mentioned earlier) and was so well established in Britain that the similarly pitched soprano and contralto saxhorns were not taken up in great numbers. Henry Distin played a solo on the saxotromba in November 1846⁹¹ at the Lyceum Theatre, London, however, this instrument, which was popular abroad, particularly in the cavalry bands, did not take root in Britain.

⁹¹ *The Times*, November 4th and 5th 1846, p.2.



Figure 33: Saxotrombas

Source: Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992)

The Saxotromba (or saxtromba in German) was designed with a larger proportion of cylindrical tubing to conical and so produced a brighter tone that was said to be a cross between a trumpet and a horn. The instruments were patented, by Adolphe Sax, in a range of sizes similar to saxhorns in 1845 and were particularly useful to cavalry musicians. Unlike the French horn, the saxotromba (and the saxhorn) could be played with one hand, the other controlling the reigns of the horse and there was also less danger of injury to the embouchure from a rearing horse's head.

The saxtuba is first mentioned (January 17th 1847) in connection with a Distin performance at the Music-Hall, Store Street, London⁹² and is described⁹³ as being built in the circular form of the Roman buccina. Not long after its introduction, saxtubas made their appearance in Fromental Halévy's opera *Le Juif errant* (*The Wandering Jew*) at the Paris Opéra

⁹² *The Times*, January 18th 1847, p.4.

⁹³ Herbert, Trevor and Wallace, John, *The Cambridge Companion to Brass Instruments*. (Cambridge: CUP, 1997).

on 23 April 1852⁹⁴ where Adolphe Sax was the musical director of the Opéra's stage band. His position gave him, in collaboration with the composer, the perfect opportunity to introduce various new instruments into the productions. In the opera, ten saxtubas are heard on stage in the *Triumphal March* in eight different sizes.



Figure 34: Saxtuba⁹⁵

Source: Wikipedia

The Distins started manufacturing in 1850 soon after Henry Distin took control of the company in October 1849 at 9, Great Newport Street, London and in 1851 both Distin and Sax put trade stands up displaying their instruments at the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, which was held in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, London, from 1st May to 15th October. Sax displayed eighty five instruments and received the Council Medal⁹⁶ and Henry

⁹⁴ Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

⁹⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saxtuba>

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*,

Distin also won an award but the competition between the two manufacturers developed into a dispute and following this, Sax dissolved the partnership with Distins.

Henry Distin, who no longer held the exclusive franchise on Sax instruments in Britain, increased his own productions and made a set of four brass instruments called Euphonic Horns⁹⁷, which were, according to Horwood⁹⁸ a variation of valved bugles and these instruments were used, in July 1851, for a string of performances at Royal Music Hall, Adelaide Street, Strand, London: ‘Mr. Distin and sons will have the honour of performing on their improved Sax Horns, introducing, for the first time in London, their newly invented Euphonic Horns’.⁹⁹ Following a performance by the Distins in Bristol October 1851 the euphonic horns are described:

‘The second part introduced a quartette, selected from Donizetti’s ‘Belisario,’ which was performed upon newly patented instruments, called ‘Euphonic Horns,’ the tones produced from which are of a more round and equal character (though scarcely, perhaps, so full and melodious) than those emitted by the Sax horns and tubas. The effect of the alto euphonic horn in its highest notes was quite flute-like, and the performance altogether appeared to give satisfaction.’¹⁰⁰

After John Distin’s retirement concerts in 1852, the Distin Family brass quartet ceased its concert performances but such was the popularity of this kind of brass performance that Henry Distin, in true entrepreneurial style, organised several brass ensembles for performances capitalising on the success of his former family group. The Distin Flugelhorn¹⁰¹ Union of 1854 was the first of such new groups which was said to be: ‘a complete brass band. At the Royal Panopticon they are played by eight admirable performers, including the three Messrs. Distin,

⁹⁷ Further attention is given to these euphonic horns and the arrival of the euphonium in Chapter 6.

⁹⁸ Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

⁹⁹ *The Times*, July 4th 1851, p.1.

¹⁰⁰ *Bristol Mercury*, October 11th 1851.

¹⁰¹ There are several ways to spell flugelhorn: fluegelhorn, fleugelhorn, flügelhorn, fluglehorn, fluegalhorn, fleugalhorn, fluegel horn, fleugel horn, fluegal horn, fleugal horn, flügel horn and fluge horn but for this dissertation flugelhorn is used.

whose selections of classical music, beautifully arranged and executed, form one of the most delightful musical treats that can be imagined'.¹⁰²



Figure 35: Eb flugelhorn
Source: Knellar Hall Instrument Museum

The Distin Flugelhorn Union performed successfully¹⁰³ for the next few years, mostly in London venues on a family of instruments which were built in a range of sizes and pitches and were reportedly new inventions of Henry Distin: ‘Mr. Distin’s newly-invented instrument the flugelhorn- this invention is an important step in the progress of instrumental music’.¹⁰⁴ Playing a high Eb flugelhorn, Sam West led the group¹⁰⁵ which consisting of eight players, included the three remaining Distin family members who were still playing at that time; Henry, Theodore and William. The flugelhorn, however, had been around for many years despite the claims that Henry Distin had invented the instrument. As the histories of the flugelhorn and the keyed bugle are linked, there has been, inevitably, some confusion; in fact, today, a bugle in Germany is called a flugelhorn and in France a flugelhorn is called a bugle. The name, flugel, means flank or wing, and refers to the flanking manoeuvre used to encircle and trap prey in the course of a hunt, or the

¹⁰² *John Bull Newspaper*, August 5th 1854.

¹⁰³ *The Era*, October 8th 1854.

¹⁰⁴ *John Bull Newspaper*, August 5th 1854.

¹⁰⁵ West, Sam. ‘Letter’, *British Bandsman* May 1889.

wing of an advancing army. The signals, from these positions were, therefore, blown by a bugler playing at 'the flugel' and when valves were fitted to the bugle the name flugel became confused with all the other valved bugles that were being made at that time. Flugelhornes were made, as previously mentioned in a range of sizes, including the tenor shown below.



Figure 36: Distin tenor flugelhorn in F from 1855
Source: Rob Stewart Instrument Collection

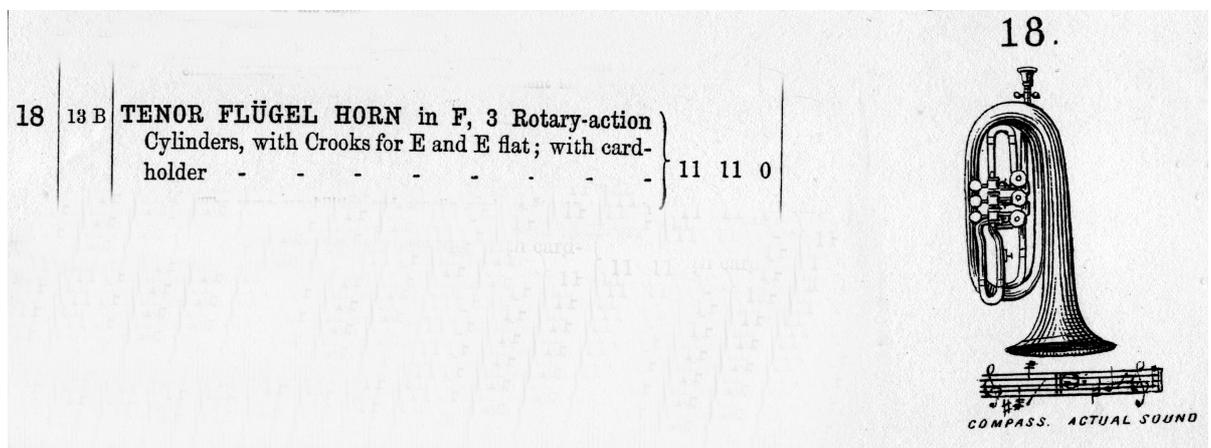


Figure 37: Tenor flugelhorn
Source: The Distin Instrument Catalogue of 1857

The bugle, keyed bugle, valved bugle and subsequently the flugelhorn play an important role in the history of both the Distin Family brass ensemble and the brass band. While the Distins

‘popularised the Sax instruments’,¹⁰⁶ they were also highly effective manufacturing and selling the instrument, promoting it heavily via the Flugelhorn Union.

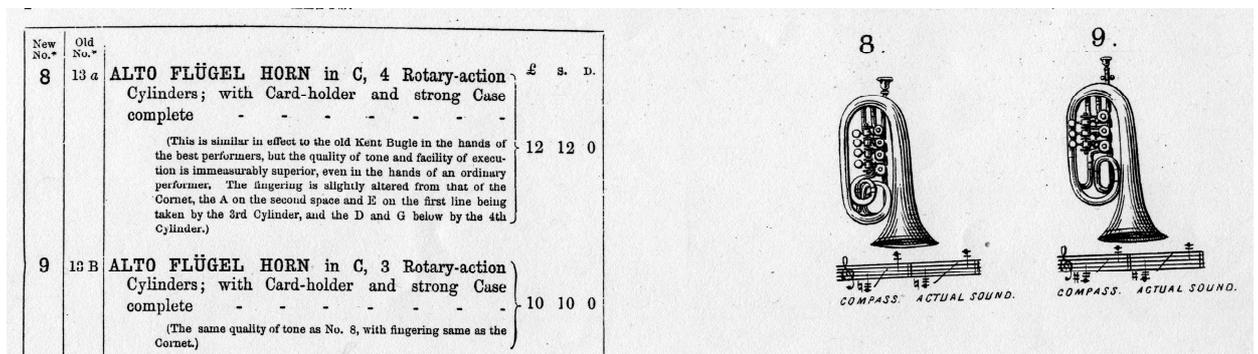


Figure 38: Alto flugelhorn
Source: The Distin Instrument Catalogue of 1857

The alto, or more correctly, mezzo-soprano flugelhorn in Bb, is essential to today’s brass bands and is often used as a solo voice as well as in conjunction with the horn group as it was from its inception.



Figure 39: A modern flugelhorn in Bb
Source: Band Supplies, Leeds¹⁰⁷

Jackson states, incorrectly, that the Distins were using ventril horns up until 1844.¹⁰⁸ Ventril means valve, and was a term used to distinguish the natural horn from the valved horn in the nineteenth century and consequently, when Henry Distin designed a new range of instruments

¹⁰⁶ 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), pp.10-67.

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.band-supplies.co.uk/>

many years after valves (or ventils) had been invented, and gave them the name ventil horn, confusion was bound to follow.

Distin's avoidance of the Sax name and efforts to supplant the saxhorn with instruments of his own design are reasons why brass band instruments, today, are not called saxhorns even when they are, in fact, just that, and Sax's alto saxhorns were replaced by Distin's tenor horns. While nomenclature for early brass instruments is widely accepted as being confused, it seems that Distin added greatly to the perplexity and the name *saxhorn* became a generic term as well as a specific instrument name.



Figure 40: Soprano ventil horn/cornet in C
Source: Instrument belonging to the author

¹⁰⁸ Jackson, Enderby, 'Origin & Promotion of Brass Band Contests', *British Musician & Orchestral Times*, (July 1896), p.131.



Figure 41: Alto ventral Horn in Eb
Source: Durham University Antique Brass Instrument Collection

Further confusion came when Henry Distin tried unsuccessfully to replace the well loved cornet with his ventral cornet:

'In 1848 the Distins advertise the sale of Distin's new Ventral Cornet requires no crooks'.¹⁰⁹

But even Adolphe Sax's contralto saxhorn could not challenge the general appeal of the cornet which had taken a firm place in the makeup of a brass band. Henry Distin having been partially successful in dismissing the competition from Sax and his saxhorns, and was aiming to take over the British market with his brand of cornet, after all Distin had gained success with his ventral horn why not try the ventral cornet? No one had previously registered a patent on the cornet in England.

In 1851 the Distin Manufacturing Company supplied a set of nine instruments with upright bells to the Mossley Temperance Band, on which it achieved its historic win at the first Belle Vue contest 1853. Following this, Mossley Temperance Band decided to change its set of instruments to conform to new contest regulations instigated in 1855 and the set of instruments were returned to the Distin company. A short while later (October 5th 1859) the Daily Telegraph advertised

¹⁰⁹ *The Times*, February 9th and 11th 1848, p.1.

performances of the Distin Ventil Horn Union in Weston's Grand Music Hall and states that Henry Distin was the inventor of the Ventil horn: 'Mr. Henry Distin [and] his Ventil Horn Union, who make their first appearance on the 10th of October, and perform on an entirely new set of instruments, invented and manufactured by Mr. H. Distin'.¹¹⁰



Figure 42: Distin's Silver Ventil Horn Union

(the instrument held by Sam West (front row, left) does not have an upright bell and appears to be an anomaly. As West was the leader of the Flugel Horn Union of 1857, the instrument he is holding is probably an Eb Flugelhorn and not a Ventil horn)¹¹¹

Source: Edinburg University, A Myers & E Mitroulia¹¹²

This Ventil Horn Union, organized and directed by Henry Distin (far right in the picture above), performed quite frequently with significant success over the next few years at prestigious musical events and even took part in a string of semi-staged performances of the opera *Norma* by

¹¹⁰ *The Daily Telegraph*, October 5th 1859.

¹¹¹ West, Sam, 'Letter', *British Bandsman* May 1889.

Bellini (arranged by Henry Distin) in Weston's Music Hall, Holborn, London.¹¹³ A clearer picture of the family of ventril horns was published in an early edition of Geiringer's book on musical instruments, but confusingly they were described as the original horns made by Sax.¹¹⁴ But the picture below of the group of five musicians does not show the Distins and the instruments may be identified as ventril horns not saxhorns.



Figure 43: Ventril horns played by unknown musicians

Source: This picture purporting to be the Distins with saxhorns originally appeared in Karl Geiringer's book *Instruments in the History of Western Music* (plate LX11 Oxford University Press). Subsequent editions omit the picture and the reference to the Distins.

Besides the parallel developments of the Distin Family brass group, Henry Distin was often employed as a soloist performing mostly on the ventril horn but also on an instrument called an 'alto horn' (unfortunately further details on this instrument are not given). On the occasion of the Crystal Palace brass band contest of 1860, he walked around the grounds playing his helicon bass amongst the public.

¹¹² <http://www.music.ed.ac.uk/euchmi/bpe/bpedi018.jpg>

¹¹³ *Daily Telegraph*, October 16th 1860.

¹¹⁴ Scott, Jack, *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970), p.29.



Figure 44: Henry Distin with his helicon or contre- bass

Source: Scott, Jack, *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England*
(Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970)

Henry Distin's Ventil Horn Band was expanded from nine to twenty five musicians a few years later and was comprised of some of his employees,¹¹⁵ but unfortunately he found that he could not always rely on his workers to play for him in his Ventil Horn Band, and for a scheduled performance (September 1862) at the Canterbury Hall, Lambeth, London, they failed to show up.¹¹⁶ Soon after this embarrassment we find that Henry Distin, perhaps realising his own limitations in conducting and organising a large, professional-style band, made use of an agent.¹¹⁷ A few years later, in 1867, Henry Distin formed an alliance with the great cornet player Jules Levy (who was endorsing Distin instruments) to form the Distin and Levy Instrumental Union:

St Martin's Hall – Popular Promenade Concerts, with novel features, under the management of Mr. F. Strange and the Alhambra Company. Orchestra of fifty performers. Conductor M. Rivière: solo cornet, M.

¹¹⁵ *The Era*, October 13th 1861.

¹¹⁶ *The Era*, October 5th 1862.

¹¹⁷ *The Era*, June 12th 1864.

Levy. Brilliant programme. Levy and Distin's instrumental Union. Opens this evening, begins at eight. Admission is 1s.¹¹⁸

The extract from the *Daily Telegraph* confirms that the Instrumental Union developed into Levy and Distin's Grand Instrumental Union and this group, managed by F. Strange, is described as, 'the most remarkable brass band in England'¹¹⁹; a comment which suggests a direct correlation between the various Distin brass groups and the emerging brass band movement. The exact instrumentation of the Grand Instrumental Union is unknown but from various posters during this period it may be deduced that the Grand Instrumental Union of 1867 consisted of up to sixty performing musicians.¹²⁰

The Distin brass group performances climaxed at this time and ceased when, in 1868, Henry sold the company to Boosey and Co. With the intentions of retiring, Henry Distin could have simply stood back and observed the massive increase in brass instrument sales world-wide and seen the phenomenal rise of brass bands from a distance but he chose to emigrate to America where his ventures into brass instrument manufacturing went from strength to strength.

Conclusions

As both performers and manufacturers the Distins were innovators. The instruments they used throughout the period changed, sometimes as a response to newly invented instruments and other times by finding or creating new instrument themselves, and with the rapid development of brass instrumental technology in the nineteenth century, brass banding became increasingly popular. However, brass bands needed to settle into an organised, functioning movement with standard instrumentation, unified sound, concerted stylistic approach and repertory. All these aspects, and more, were provided by the innovations of the Distins.

¹¹⁸ *The Daily Telegraph*, February 18th 1867.

¹¹⁹ *The Daily Telegraph*, March 25th 1867, p.1.

¹²⁰ *The Daily Telegraph*, April 8th 1867, p.1.

The Distins were astute in following trends; they would discover an instrument, develop it, present it and perform on it, but if the public demand wanted another kind of sound, pitch or shape to their instrument, they were quick to respond and often appeared to have created the trend.

From 1838 to 1867 the Distin family established a reputation for musical excellence which was achieved through the medium of performance, through strategic use of particular brass instruments, and promotional efforts. To begin, the Distins used natural horns, trombone and trumpet, then keyed instruments and then valved instruments. The cornet came into the group, and then the saxhorns, followed by an array of various instruments and with the Grand Instrumental Union of 1867 we may presume that most of the instruments in the Distin catalogue, including trombones and percussion were included.

While the Distins were a seminal influence on early British brass band development their aspirations for the manufacturing company were much higher. From the Musical Instrument Catalogue of 1857 and the letters of commendation from hundreds of different musicians around the world we find that the various instruments used in the Distin Family brass group and manufactured by the Distin Company were sold not just to the brass bands in UK but to the military bands and orchestras around the world.