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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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FARR, RAYMOND KENNETH (2012) *The Distin Family and its Influence on the Development of the Brass Band Movement in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Masters thesis, Durham University.

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## Chapter 8

# The Distins and brass band contests

### Introduction

The innovative activities of the Distins were most prominent in connection with manufacturing brass instruments, but I have also argued that in the fields of performance and publishing their impact on a developing brass band culture was vital. This chapter examines the Distin influence on brass band contesting which had its origins in bell ringing contests and choir competitions which were a prominent feature of British life in the nineteenth century. The Distins had established virtuoso performance standards which were recognised around the world virtually before brass band contesting arrived and while band contests are by their nature sporting events, the main incentive is the striving for excellence in music performance. Attaining high performance standards established by the Distins, and being rewarded for it in contests, became the fulfilment of ambition for many amateur brass players and glowing reports from reviewers indicate that standards at these events were high, compared with the expected performance standards of the day which were driven by competition and the ambition to defeat the competition.

### The Burton Constable contest in 1845



Figure 92: Burton Constable, near Hull  
Source: Permission granted- Burton Constable Estate

Enderby Jackson (1827-1903), a friend and colleague of Henry Distin,<sup>1</sup> gave a detailed account of the first formal brass band contest held in July 1845 at Burton Constable (see Appendix A) and his vivid picture of the event includes and highlights the Distin's contribution to the success of the event<sup>2</sup>. Jackson's report states that four of the five brass bands taking part were playing saxhorns which had been supplied by the Distin Company following Jackson's recommendation<sup>3</sup>. At this time the Distin Company was in a very early stage of development, and must have acted quickly to import the saxhorns, advertise them, and deliver the instruments and the musicians would also have needed time to learn to play the new instruments. Nonetheless, the Distin name is seen to be at the forefront of an activity which became, according to many, 'the life blood' of banding.

### **The Belle Vue Contests in Manchester in 1853 and 1855**

By 1853 the number of brass bands in Britain had increased considerably and competition between neighbouring village bands was growing. Contests had become a popular musical, social and sporting activity and on National Holiday Monday, September 5<sup>th</sup> 1853 the first Belle Vue, Manchester Brass Band Contest took place. The contest, which later became the British Open Championships, was advertised as 'A Grand Musical Contest', and 16,000 people attended. Eight bands entered, one of which was the Mossley Temperance Saxhorn Band conducted by William Taylor (as mentioned in chapter 6). The Distins, having supplied Mossley with a full set of saxhorns<sup>4</sup>, had their future success as a saxhorn supplier, sealed when the band won the contest and thus inspired other bands to begin the process of conversion to saxhorns.<sup>5</sup> The performance has been

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for copies of correspondence between Distin and Jackson.

<sup>2</sup> Jackson, Enderby, 'A Memorable Day at Burton Constable' *Musical Opinion and Music Trade Review*. (October 1896).

<sup>3</sup> Jackson, Enderby, *A Biography*. Msc 1885.

<sup>4</sup> Scott, Jack, *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970).

<sup>5</sup> Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in England 1840-1914 A social history* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p.218.

described as a musical sensation<sup>6</sup>, for which The Distin Company gained huge kudos and, no doubt, many orders for instruments.

At this contest, each band was required to play one 'own choice' piece and also a set test piece. This was the first occurrence of a set test piece in band competitions, and it established a formula and tradition which is still used in many contests today. For the 1855 occasion a new work was written by Mr. James Melling, conductor of the Stalybridge Band and while he was not known for his composing, provided a piece called *Overture – Orynthia*.



Figure 93: James Alfred Melling  
Source: Besses o' th' Barn Band web site

Unfortunately the work cannot be found but it is likely to have been an arrangement, not an original composition, and considering the popularity of opera music and its perceived artistic worth, it was probably an extract from an opera. In searching for the piece I have discovered a possible contender located in the opera *The Noble Outlaw* by Sir Henry Rowley Bishop (1786-1855). Bishop

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<sup>6</sup> Taylor, Arthur, *Brass Bands* (Hertford: Granada Pub. Ltd., 1979), p.40.

died in April 1855 (the same year as the competition), hence the use of his music may have been considered an appropriate tribute. Bishop was a prominent composer in the nineteenth century and wrote a great deal of music in his position as Musical Director at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden and later composer at Edinburgh University.

Reports show that Bishop's second wife Anna Riviere Bishop, a famous cantatrice, performed with the Distins on several occasions and this provides a connection between Distin, Bishop, his music, and the developing brass band movement.

IN B $\flat$  HUTCHINGS & ROMER'S TRANSPOSED EDITION. IN C.

**PILGRIM OF LOVE.**  
Song.  
MUSIC  
**SIR HENRY R. BISHOP.**

Ent. Sto. Hall Price 2/6

London,  
HUTCHINGS & ROMER,  
9, CONDUIT STREET, REGENT STREET W.  
WHOLESALE WAREHOUSE  
10 & 11, LITTLE MARLBOROUGH ST. REGENT ST. W.

*WH&GH DREAPER*

**“ORYNTHIA, MY BELOVED”**  
COMPOSED BY SIR H. R. BISHOP.

Andantino con moto. *ff* *p* *ff* *p*

O...ryn.thia. my be..lov.ed! I call in vain!

*pp* *ff*

*Espress.*

O...ryn..thia! O...ryn..thia! Echo hears and call a...

*p* *p* *ff*

*P.b. 1876*

Figure 94: Song- The Pilgrim of Love  
Source: British Library.

*The Noble Outlaw* was first performed on April 7<sup>th</sup> 1815, and published in London 1817 by Goulding D'Almaine. The second movement of the opera is a Recitative and Romance called *Pilgrim of Love* and starts with *Orynthia, My Beloved* and while the title suggests that this is in fact the test piece used at Belle Vue, the character of the music would not be appropriate for a brass band

contest, especially as the event was held outdoors. Trevor Herbert has extensively researched into the history of the Cyfarthfa Band and building upon his research, I have located a set of band parts to a piece called *The Pilgrim of Love* by Sir Henry Rowley Bishop, in the Cyfarthfa Museum's band library.



Figure 95: Trombone solo part to 'Pilgrim of Love'  
Source: The Cyfarthfa Museum

The manuscript part as shown above, is an arrangement of the vocal score, featuring the trombone in the role of the tenor soloist but as a slow melody for trombone would not be suitable as a band contest piece it is unlikely that this was the piece used at Belle Vue in 1855.

A quick march called *The Pilgrim of Love*, composed by Bishop but arranged anonymously, has been located in the British Library.

1<sup>st</sup> CLARINET Bb.  
 QUICK MARCH N<sup>o</sup> 8. THE PILGRIM OF LOVE. BISHOP

8<sup>va</sup> ad lib.  
 CRES.  
 CRES.  
 H. POTTER & CO. 30 CHARING CROSS, LONDON, S.W. D.C.

Figure 96: 1<sup>st</sup> Clarinet part to the Quick March, 'Pilgrim of Love' by Bishop  
 Source: British Library

The music is presented in march style (clarinet part shown above) and was published by H. Potter and Co. 30, Charing Cross, London, in 1885, thirty years after the Belle Vue contest. While the character of this arrangement *would* be suitable for a contest and the same musical theme is used, the scoring is for full wind band not brass band and so this version is not likely to be test piece of 1855. Melling's *Orynthia* is yet to be traced but nonetheless, there are some clues regarding the background of this piece and connections with the Distins.

### The Zoological Gardens contest in Hull in 1856

After his experience at Burton Constable in 1845, Enderby Jackson, a vitally important figure in the history of nineteenth-century brass bands, organised his first brass band contest in the Zoological Gardens, Hull on Monday June 30<sup>th</sup> 1856. For this event he composed *Yorkshire Waltzes*<sup>7</sup>. The scoring of *Yorkshire Waltzes* includes an alto saxhorn in Ab and a tenor saxhorn in Db and these instruments were provided only by Distin and Sons until 1851. There is also a strong possibility that the company supplying saxhorns to the bands would also supply the other instruments required for

<sup>7</sup> Jackson, Enderby, *A Biography*. Msc 1885.

the test piece such as cornets, trombones, ophicleides, etc. Hence, the Distin connection with this contest was also quite strong.

Figure 97: The first page of a reconstructed score to *Yorkshire Waltzes* composed by Enderby Jackson in 1856

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

Jackson's mission statement was 'The Propagation of Music amongst the Working Classes' and from his biography we learn more about the background to this particular project: 'I arranged to hold my first Band Contest in the Zoological Gardens Hull on Monday, July 4<sup>th</sup> 1856, and at once issued my announcements to the Band instructors, Christmas 1855. I expressly composed, as a test piece, a set of Waltzes with Introduction, etc. and visited the teachers in the various towns explaining my new effects and how they were to instruct the workmen; where to buy the best and cheapest instruments and other details'.<sup>8</sup> Jackson and Distin were colleagues and worked together on several projects, and so it is highly likely that he recommended Distin's instruments to the bands.

<sup>8</sup> John Enderby Jackson, *A Biography*. Msc. 1885.

However, Jackson's biography is imprecise on the number of bands attending the competition and according to newspaper reports from the event, twenty-one bands signed up, but only twelve showed up and took part<sup>9</sup>. Each of the bands was required to play Jackson's *Yorkshire Waltzes*, plus one other 'own choice' work and the own choices included pieces well established in the brass repertory by the Distin Family brass ensemble, such as the Grand Selection from *Lucia di Lammermoor* by Donizetti.

### The Crystal Palace Contests in 1860 -1863

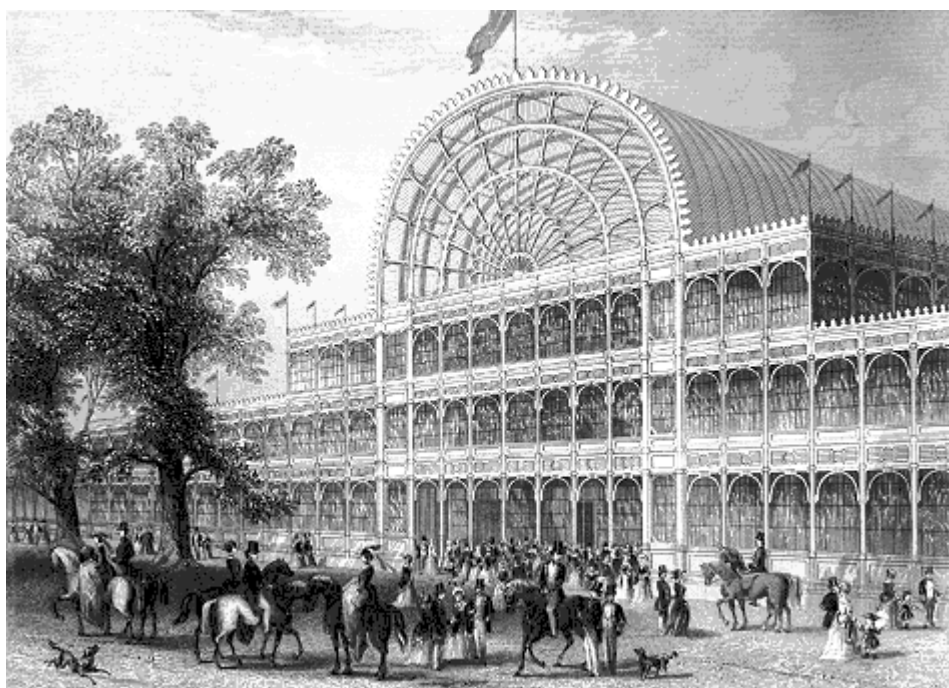


Figure 98: The Crystal Palace  
Source: Wikipedia

The Crystal Palace (pictured above) was originally built for the Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations of 1851 in Hyde Park, London and after the exhibition the building was moved to Sydenham in South London in 1854. The palace and its gardens was a popular meeting place for thousands of visitors every year, with a programme of entertainment events and a resident brass band – for which instruments were supplied by Henry Distin<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>10</sup> *The Era*, May 14<sup>th</sup> 1854.

The earliest version of today's National Brass Band Championships was held here, organised by Enderby Jackson, and took place on Tuesday July 10<sup>th</sup> and Wednesday July 11<sup>th</sup> 1860 and attracted audiences in their thousands. This two day event was the first brass band contest ever held in the south of England. Various newspaper reports serve to illustrate the character of the event, and according to *The Era*, Henry Distin assisted Enderby Jackson in the organisation.<sup>11</sup>

The first day was called the 'Great National Contest' and was open to any 'Amateur, Yeomanry and Rifle Corps bands', and the second day was called the 'Sydenham Amateur Contest', which was for all amateur bands that had not won a prize in excess of £20 in the previous year. The reference to corps bands comes about because of the many amateur brass players enlisted in the Rifle Volunteers. The contest attracted seventy-two bands for the first day, and ninety-eight for the second, and there were eighteen judges including Mr. George Loder (Distin's brother in law) who were listening throughout the two days. Following a preliminary round, the final winner was<sup>12</sup> Black Dyke Mills Band conducted by Samuel Longbottom (playing *Selection: Preciosa* by Weber) and the prize for the winning band included a champion contre-bass in Eb, value 35 guineas, which was made and presented by Henry Distin. For the second day each band had to play two pieces, one of their own-choice and an original piece composed by Enderby Jackson, *Grand Prize Quadrille*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *The Era*, September 7<sup>th</sup> 1862.

<sup>12</sup> *The Times*, Wednesday July 11<sup>th</sup> 1860, p.9.

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

*Grand Prize Quadrille.* Enderby Jackson - Arr.

No 1

No 2

Figure 99: *Grand Prize Quadrille* composed and arranged by Enderby Jackson for one of the Crystal Palace Contests.  
Source: Arnold Myers, Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments

Despite Enderby Jackson's 'organizational brilliance'<sup>14</sup> things did not always go smoothly and at the conclusion of the second day's competition, Jackson disqualified a band for having appeared in another contest outside the Crystal Palace grounds which had been set up in opposition to Jackson's event. The band, however, chose to ignore Jackson's warnings not to appear and in front of 40,000 people, Jackson told the band to 'clear off'. All the competing bands were given concessions on train tickets, but Jackson stated that this band would have to pay their own way home.

For a grand finale on both days, Jackson put all the bands together for a massed band concert; a massive undertaking requiring much organisational support. He structured a short, one

<sup>14</sup> Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p.15.

hour rehearsal and a concert where the band members were assembled together in ‘The Handel Orchestra’ and performed the following programme:<sup>15</sup>

- *Rule Britannia* -Arne
- *Hallelujah Chorus* -Handel
- *Wedding March* - Mendelssohn
- *The Heavens are Telling* - Haydn
- *God Save the Queen*

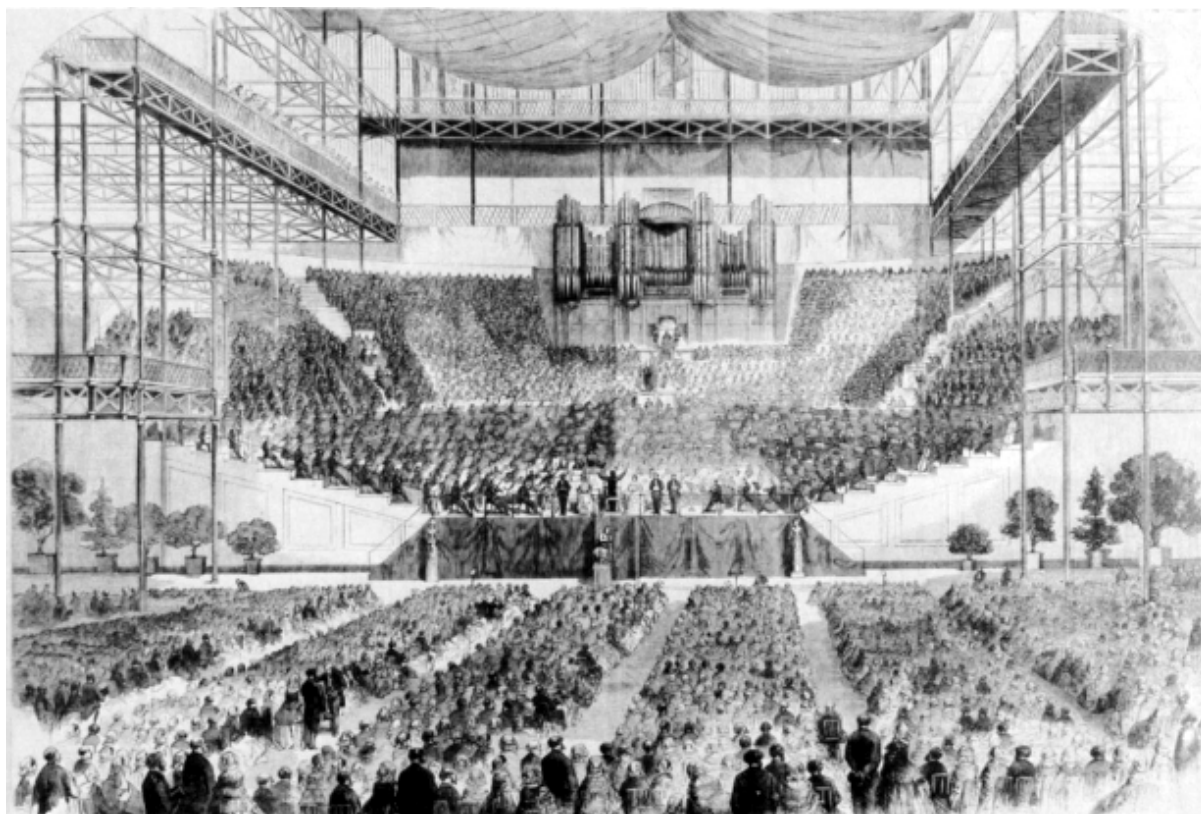


Figure 100: A Crystal Palace concert.  
Source: Wikipedia

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.,

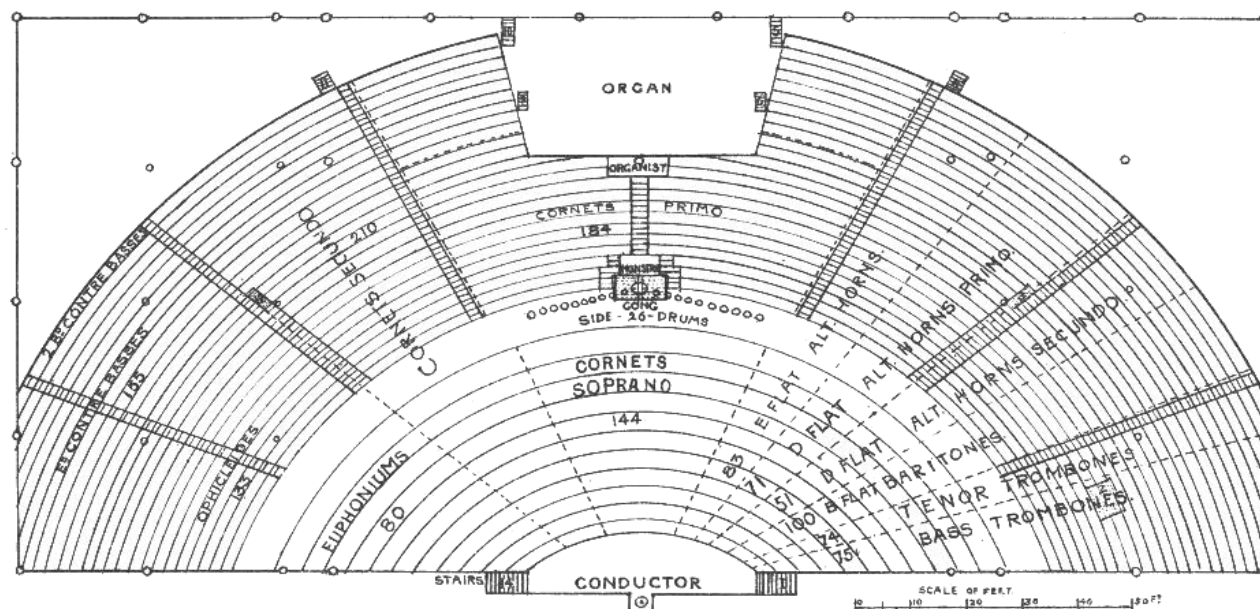


Figure 101: Seating plan for the Crystal Palace massed band concerts conducted by Enderby Jackson  
 Source: Web site- Internet Bandman's Everything Within (IBEW)

The *Times* reviewed the massed bands performance as follows:

The effect of the combined legions of 'blowers' was tremendous. The organ, which accompanied them, and which on less exceptional occasions is apt to drown everything, was scarcely audible in the midst of the brazen tempest. Nothing less than the new 'monster gong-drum' manufactured by Mr. Henry Distin - to wield the thunder of which required the united efforts of Messrs. Charles Thompson, of the Crystal Palace Band, and Middleditch, of the London Rifle Brigade - could prevail against it. The pieces that pleased the most (perhaps because the best executed) were Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March' and the National Anthem, both of which were unanimously encored. The whole performance was conducted with wonderful vigour and precision by Mr. Enderby Jackson, of Hull.

The article above refers to Distin's 'monster-gong-drum,' also called the Great Leviathan Drum. This instrument (shown in Chapter 6) had been made to a special order for the Handel Festival held at the Crystal Palace in June 1859. The gong drum was, according to *The Times*, played by two musicians, Thompson and Middleditch, but according to *The British Bandsman*

report of December 24<sup>th</sup> 1904<sup>16</sup>, Henry Distin, himself played the instrument with his helper Middleditch.

The next year (July 24<sup>th</sup> & 25<sup>th</sup> 1861) Enderby Jackson repeated his success and Henry Distin was involved again with the production by supervising a corps of side drums from the Grenadier Guards to perform along with his monster drum in the final concert. Amongst the twenty brass bands taking part this year was Distin's Employees Band<sup>17</sup>, a band which also functioned as an army volunteer band, paid when required, by the Queen Victoria's Rifles regiment.<sup>18</sup> This connection with the volunteer movement was probably a valuable resource for Henry Distin giving opportunities for sales of instruments, financial remuneration for his employees and many other benefits. While this initiative by Henry Distin to promote his Distin's Employees Brass Band may have been to gain public attention for his company, it failed, unfortunately, to make an impression as a contesting outfit and so Distin, fearful of making a negative impression on his company, made a strategic decision not to plough valuable resources into this aspect of his music business and ceased contesting. For him, economic motivation was stronger than artistic or sporting endeavour and at this time, being involved with professional performances with his various brass groups, he considered brass band contests to be the realm of amateur musicians.

For the 1862 contest, Jackson used just one day: 9<sup>th</sup> September and each contesting band was required to play a selection from Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable*, arranged expressly for the contest by James Smyth(e) (1818 –1885). A selection from the same opera, arranged by Meyerbeer himself, was the first piece performed by the Distin Family following its adoption of saxhorns in 1844. James Smyth was an associate of the Distins, who published Smyth's works and sold instruments to his Royal Artillery Band.

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<sup>16</sup> *The British Bandsman*, December 24<sup>th</sup> 1904.

<sup>17</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, Wednesday July 24<sup>th</sup> 1861.

<sup>18</sup> *The Illustrated News of the World*, June 15<sup>th</sup> 1861.

SELECTION **ROBERT LE DIABLE.** Meyerbeer:

Arranged for the National Brass Band Contest for 1862, by JAMES SMYTH, R.A.

*Andante Maestoso.*

Figure 102: Part of the original score of the 1862 Crystal Palace contest piece arranged by J. Smyth  
 Source: Arnold Myers, Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments

The rules of the competition stated that a maximum of eighteen musicians were allowed in each band (percussion was not allowed) and so, with 13 written parts, there was scope for some doubling of parts. The competing bands of 1862 were made up of various combinations of instruments (no two bands used exactly the same instrumentation) and Smyth's arrangement would have gone a long way towards establishing the standardisation of brass band instrumentation. However, the exact instrumentation required or intended is not clear, and was possibly deliberately ambiguous, knowing that each band would have a different combination of brass instruments.

Distin was, again involved with the organization of a massed bands concert to finish the event, not only with his monster drum but also by directing a special corps of regimental buglers and drummers of her Majesty's Foot Guards who were engaged to play the 'calls' and 'solos' in a

piece called *The Rifle Galop* by Henry Farmer and once again, Henry Distin presented one of his circular contre basses to the winning band.<sup>19</sup>

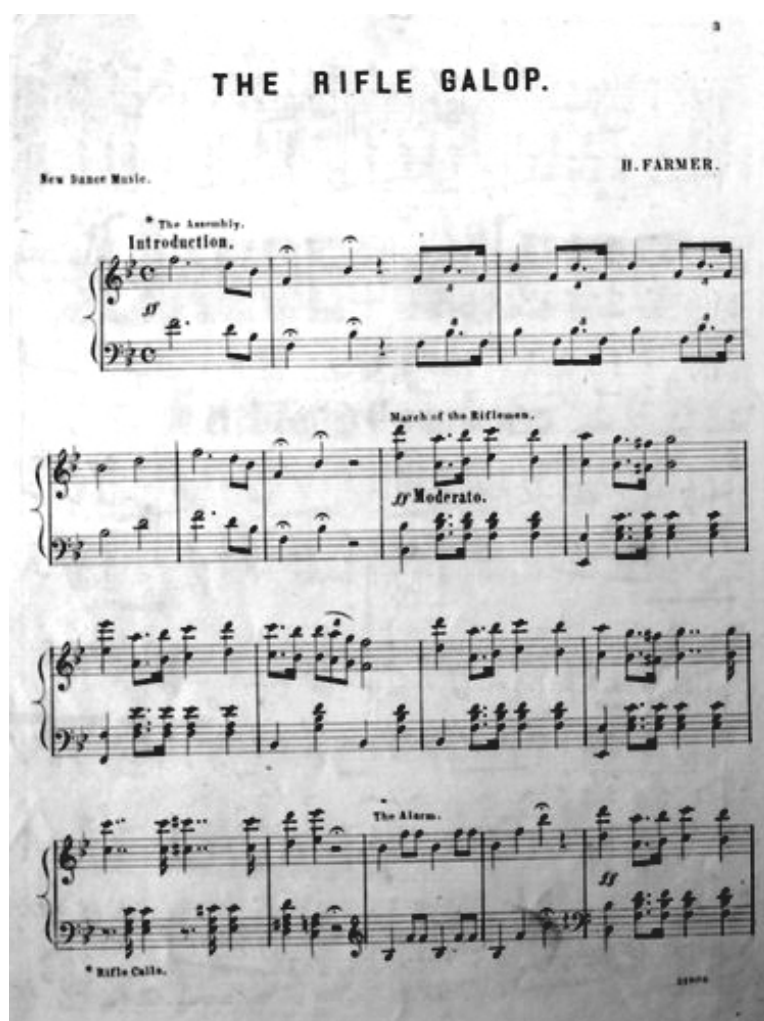


Figure 103: Extract from: *The Rifle Galop* by Henry Farmer  
Source: British Library.

Enderby Jackson's final Crystal Palace brass band contest took place on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1863 when the number of competing bands dwindled to twenty-one.<sup>20</sup> Again, Henry Distin presented one of his circular contre-basses to the winning Blandford Band, and all the competing bands assembled for a massed bands concert<sup>21</sup>.

Correspondence between Enderby Jackson and Henry Distin reveal a controversial incident related to this contest, where Jackson was accused by Gustave-Auguste Besson, owner of a

<sup>19</sup> *Daily News*, September 10<sup>th</sup> 1862.

<sup>20</sup> *The Times*, Thursday September 11<sup>th</sup> 1862. p.12.

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

instrument manufacturing firm, of accepting a financial bribe from Distin for unfairly 'advancing the interest' of the Distin company.

Mr. Enderby Jackson

9 Great Newport St  
August 21st 1863

Dear Sir

We do not think it worth our while to notice the statements respecting our Firm, circulated in Mr. Besson's advertisements (altho' they could be readily refuted) as we only consider them as Puffs for his own trade and easily seen through by any persons of common sense.

But as Mr. Besson (thro' us) has attacked your character as an honest man, in the management of the Brass Band Contests that have taken place in different parts of the Country; we think it due to you to give the charges he has made the most unqualified denial.

We declare we have never (directly or indirectly) made you any present, in money or otherwise to induce you to advance our interests, and the assertion that you received a salary from our Firm is a wilful falsehood.

With respect to our connection with the Band Contests, all that we have done has been to present Instruments to the successful Competitors.

Use this letter as you please, should you think it worth while to notice these foolish assertions  
and Believe us to remain

Yours truly

H. Distin and Co

The letter shows a strongly formed association between Distin and Jackson and Distin is being supportive to Jackson against accusations made by Besson. Besson regarded the presenting of awards and prizes by Distin to the competitors as unethical, and suggested that Jackson was being corrupted. Only five years later, Besson adopted a contrary ethic, by sponsoring a brass band contest himself<sup>22</sup>. Today's contests are, to a large degree, dependent upon sponsorship from instrument manufacturers and so Distin's innovative support of these National Brass Band Championships may be viewed as having set a precedent.

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<sup>22</sup> Mitroulia, Eugenia and Myers, Arnold, 'The Distin Family as Instrument Makers and Dealers 1845-1874'. *Scottish Music Review*, Vol. 2, No 1 (2011).

## Conclusions

In the light of this evidence I have shown that the Distins, through their position as leaders in brass performance, brass instrument manufacturers and publishers, were able to shape the development of brass banding in the important sphere of contesting. Brass band competition was a significant part of most bands' calendars in the 1860s the Distin name was at the forefront. The Distins had established virtuoso standards of performance as brass players, created a model for brass bands to emulate, built a large instrument manufacturing company which also imported instruments and music and developed a publishing firm, all before band contesting started. When contesting became an important aspect of brass banding the Distins were critically involved not just in the fields mentioned above, but also as assistant organiser to Enderby Jackson and even one of the judges was a relation.

Two main events took pride of place, with the Distin name very much in evidence as a seminal influence in both these events. First; the Belle Vue contests in Manchester, which began in 1853 and still runs in 2011 as the British Open Championships and second; the Crystal Palace national contests (1860 – 1863), which became the National Brass Band Championships and still also runs to this day. The Distins, through their various strands of their activities, shaped and developed the brass band medium leaving a legacy that is firmly established today.