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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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Chapter 9

Conclusions

This dissertation has taken the form of an historical musicological study, identifying and analyzing the influences of the Distin Family and the effects of these influences on the developing British brass band movement in the nineteenth century. The purpose of this concluding chapter is to reflect on the issues presented throughout this dissertation, and to consider and evaluate the effects of the Distins' contribution to brass band development in the light of all the evidence presented.

During the nineteenth century the brass band movement emerged through various synergies such as social and cultural change, industrialization, publishing, contesting, and most significantly the introduction of valved instruments, particularly the cornet and the saxhorn. While the Distin input to many of these areas has been generally considered as significant, this dissertation has argued that the Distin contribution was the *most* important and crucial to the development of the British brass bands movement. The focus of this dissertation has been the emergence of the British brass band in the mid-nineteenth century, and in particular the role played in this by the father John Distin whose legacy is mainly as an iconic performer and role-model to a new society of brass players, and his second son, Henry Distin, who built around him a brass empire which permeated many aspects of British musical life.

My argument is that not only did the Distins' distinctive contribution 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 remarkable development of each family of brass instruments caused by the invention and adaptation of the valve (except for the slide trombone) was the brass band's foundation. Valves were applied to high, middle and low range instruments, providing full chromatic capability and the personal preferences of inventors, composers, players and conductors influenced the growth. The Distin Family was at the forefront of this development, being well established as an excellent performing brass group just as the important technological developments in brass instruments came along. This new chromaticism for brass instruments ignited the enthusiasm of manufacturers who went on to experiment and 'invent' all kinds of brass instruments in a variety of shapes, pitches and sizes. The Distin Company was particularly notable, in this respect, because of its innovations which served to motivate this development.

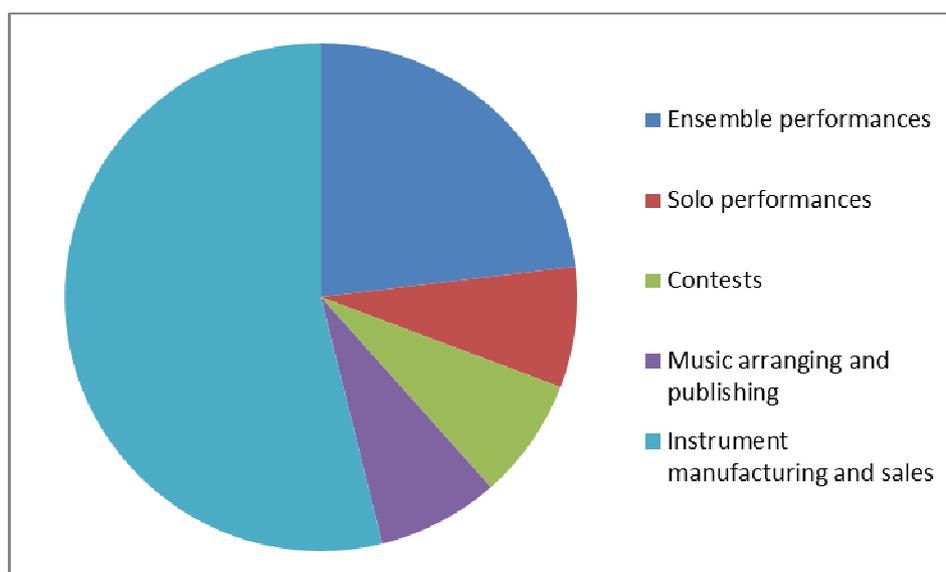
Innovation is a change in the thought process for doing something, or the useful application of new inventions or discoveries¹ and innovation may refer to products, processes, or organizations. Following the findings of Schumpeter (1934),² contributors to the scholarly literature on innovation typically distinguish between invention - an idea made manifest - and innovation, ideas applied successfully in practice. Innovation may also be linked to performance with developments in performance practice, efficiency, quality and competitive positioning. I propose that the various Distin entrepreneurial enterprises could be considered in the light of the following key elements of innovation:

1. Improvements in quality
2. The creation of new markets
3. The extension of the product range

¹ McKeown, Max, *The Truth About Innovation* (London: Prentice Hall, 2008).

² Schumpeter, Joseph A., *The Theory of Economic Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934).

and the various Distin enterprises could be regarded as text-book examples of innovation. The Distins' adoption of the saxhorns and their development of these instruments (and those instruments which followed) inspired both amateur and professional brass players and, in turn, bands. Brass bands were springing up all over Britain at this time³, copying and even developing the Distin concept of performance style, and the Distins generated a wave of enthusiasm amongst brass players, composers, publishers and most importantly manufacturers, who went on to experiment and create new ideas of their own. Having established themselves as an incomparable brass-playing group, the Distins turned their hand to manufacturing brass instruments and established one of the biggest and most important instrument manufacturers in Britain.



This dissertation has shown that 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 combination of influences exerted by the Distin family, notably by John and Henry Distin. The Distins' influence on a developing brass band movement in the nineteenth

³ 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.

century came about by a remarkable blend of entrepreneurial skills combined with a number of extraordinary innovations by them at a time in British history which was rapidly changing.

Around 1850 there was a divide in the development of British bands when the professional military bands started to include more woodwind instruments and the amateur town bands took on an all-brass identity. I have argued in this dissertation that this was not simply due to the invention of saxhorns, which had happened in 1844, but that it was particularly the result of the Distins promoting, importing and retailing these instruments to amateur bands, and then going on to develop and manufacture versions of them themselves. Furthermore, I have also argued that it was through the example provided by the Distin Family ensemble itself, its constant touring during the 1840s and 1850s, its experiments with instrumentation, and its development of a highly successful all-brass ensemble derived, from the saxhorn, that became the model for other bands to emulate, that significantly shaped the character of what was to become the specifically all-brass amateur band in Britain.

Amateur brass bands in Britain found a solution to achieving high standards of performance, demanded by competitions, by following the example established by the Distins of using a homogenic, balanced ensemble based essentially on saxhorns, but also added cornets and trombones, although many bands retained a clarinet or a piccolo flute for many years to support the high register playing, these instruments were gradually phased out due to the strict regulations of brass band competitions.



Figure 103: Hereford Salvation Army Band c1900 with two clarinets and a piccolo – top left
Source: Belonging K. Farr Hereford Salvation Army Band

Salvation Army bands, like the one shown above, were free of contesting constraints and often included in their line-up woodwind instruments, or even a set of saxophones, well into the twentieth century. The regulations for wind band instrumentation in competitions has been, and still is, unspecified, and wind bands around the world perform with the instruments they have (or possibly bring in an extra player just for the event).

Arnold Myers' comment that British audiences and musicians simply showed a preference to the sound of the all-brass combination may be the defining factor which affected the dividing pathways of developing amateur bands in Britain, and this preference came from an expectation or perception of what an all-brass group could successfully achieve. The Distin family led this divide in Britain by sustained example and high reputation, but on the continent

they were less successful in this respect. Developing bands in France, Germany, Belgium, Russia and America all had access to a full range of brass instruments including saxhorns yet despite the visiting performances by the Distin Family, chose not to adopt the British all-brass combination of cornets, saxhorns and trombones to create the brass band as a medium.

John Distin's experiments with brass instruments started by making improvements to his bugle, then, increasingly, he, and the other members of the Distin Family, experimented with various brass designs even after they adopted saxhorns. Consequently they set up a firm in order to act as sole suppliers of the saxhorns but found they could diversify fairly easily by selling other instruments, sheet music and equipment. The Distin instrument manufacturing company started by producing mouthpieces around 1850, and quickly developed a huge catalogue of instruments which they sold, in 1868, to Boosey & Co. Having established a large instrument manufacturing company, which also imported instruments and music, and developed a publishing firm, the Distins further expanded their market through involvement in, and support to, brass band contests in Britain.

The main driving forces behind early band contests were James Melling (Belle Vue) and Enderby Jackson (Crystal Palace) and this dissertation argues that the Distins were very much to the fore as a seminal influence with their performing ensemble as a role model, repertory and publishing, assistance with organisation, and the supply of their instruments. Henry Distin's manufacturing company, which became Boosey & Co., went on to be one of the biggest names in instrument manufacturing in the world especially after merging with competitors Besson and Hawkes, and this remarkable business concern had a considerable effect on a developing brass band movement.

The many glowing reports of the Distin Family brass ensemble performances (see Appendix A) clearly establish them as leaders in the field of brass music performance during nineteenth-century Britain. While their approach to performance and presentation was somewhat

ostentatious by today's standards, their profile was elevated by this style and the image created gave a strong impression of them as excellent artists with impeccable taste; an impression which gave enormous kudos, reputation and fame. This reputation and perception of the Distins as representing excellence in brass playing established them as a role model for brass bands and also permeated other branches of their work, such as brass instrument manufacturing, and resulted in them becoming leading figures at the forefront of brass band development.

This dissertation includes research findings of testimonials to the excellence of the Distin Family as 'the most remarkable brass band in England',⁴ and a consideration of the group's repertory has revealed many issues which show a propensity towards dramatic and lyrical operatic extracts. Considering the programme content of Distin performances, it is clear that they chose a strategy of entertainment and variety balanced with artistic endeavour in their presentations much like brass band concerts of today. Distin performance practice and style was an incentive to brass players, conductors and leaders who aspired to emulate the success of the Distins in music performance. Original compositions of stature were rare during this period but when publishing houses became established the Distin name again, was at the forefront. While the repertory of the group was not large, the music arrangements made for the group set an example to developing bands who were inspired to follow their example. Consequently this dissertation has argued that the popularity of brass bands was pioneered by the Distin Family through its performance style and repertory during the nineteenth century. It was the performances by the Distins that gave one of the most important incentives to brass players who aspired to emulate their success in music making. The marks of the Distins' remarkable legacy remain in the brass band and its culture today, and it has been the aim of this dissertation to reveal the richness of the historical evidence and to show its significance.

⁴*The Daily Telegraph*, March 25th 1867, p.1.

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