

The Distin Family as Instrument Makers and Dealers 1845-1874

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The Distin family (John, the father, and his four sons, George, Henry John, William Alfred and Theodore) were one of the most successful instrumental ensembles in the history of Britain.¹ Their performances as a brass quintet, and later quartet, became legendary. However, their instrument making and dealing activities were equally influential, although these may be less well known. In this article we will give an overview of the family's instrument making activities until 1874.

John's involvement in instrument making was alleged to have started while he was a member of the band of the South Devon Militia as a youth. In a much later and almost certainly spurious account it was claimed that he produced one of the first keyed bugles following an accident in which his bugle was holed, but was preceded by Haliday in publishing the invention of the keyed bugle after losing three months hospitalised.² Although there is no supporting evidence for this claim, it is not contested that John Distin was one of the best-known performers on the keyed bugle.

In the 1830s he accepted the position of the bandmaster of the band of the Marquis of Breadalbane at Taymouth Castle, on Loch Tay. He had already introduced his sons to the art of music and they joined him in the Scottish Highlands, together creating a brass ensemble.³ Their first performance is said to have taken place in Edinburgh,⁴ at the Adelphi Theatre in 1837.⁵ From there they travelled throughout Scotland. During the following seven years they successfully toured Britain. Mrs. Distin⁶ usually accompanied the quintet on the piano, and very often local artists, mainly vocalists, participated in their concerts. A couple of members of the extended family appeared often in the family's concerts. Miss Sarah Connor participated as a vocalist in numerous occasions and in 1852 she was married to Theodore Distin. She died at the early age of 34 in April 1863, a few months before the death of John Distin.⁷ Also, Mrs. Distin's brother, Mr. Loder, participated as a vocalist and conductor as did his daughter, Miss Kate Loder, the later Lady Thompson.⁸

The main instruments on which they performed were the bugle, trumpet, trombone, and french horns. However, from the concert announcements it appears that at times they attempted to introduce some novelties, such as the "Tenor Horn", the "Tenor Cor", the "clavicorn" and other instruments with which the general public was not very familiar at the time. Distin's walking-stick cornetto (usually played by Henry) was frequently used and it was usually claimed that it was invented by a family member. In one concert announcement, however, it was stated that it was invented by Mareus Moses.⁹ For almost three decades the

Distins toured Britain and Ireland, and they also performed in France, Brussels and Germany. Appendix I lists some of the concerts given by the Distin family with details of the instruments reported to have been used. The reviews of their performances report their excellence as brass instrument performers. Theodore was also a fine singer. Although the quintet, and after 1848 quartet, was the most successful aspect of their performing activities, efforts were made to create bigger ensembles. In 1854 there are references to performances of the Distin's *Flugel Horn Union* and from 1859 there are references to their *Ventil Horn Union*.

In 1844 they travelled abroad and the quintet reached Paris. The story of the Distins attending a performance where a saxhorn was played by Jean-Baptiste Arban and the saxophone by Adolphe Sax himself is well known, and will only be mentioned here briefly (Carse, 1945, pp.195-196). It is known that John Distin was interested in setting up his own instrument making business in London, and with an interpreter he visited the major instrument makers of Paris.¹¹ After listening to the saxhorn as played by Arban, he visited Sax the following day and eventually a new set of saxhorns was ordered which the family then used in their concerts. The early instruments used by the family are depicted in the famous lithograph of 1845 by Bagniet (see Fig. 1). All are bell-front saxhorns and two of the instruments are equipped with double-piston valves. Significantly, the Distins returned to Britain with their new saxhorns and quickly made the instruments widely known. The first successful introduction of the saxhorns to the British public took place in November 1844, although Sax himself had attempted to introduce them about a month before the Distins in an unsuccessful series of concerts.

A very interesting series of letters was published in *The Musical World* in January 1845 sent by a "foreign artist resident in London" believed to be Sax, and by John Distin.¹² The author of the first letter that was signed by the foreign artist complained that in the Distin family's recent performances on the new instruments, the name of the instruments ("saxhorns") and the inventor, Adolphe Sax, were not mentioned. John Distin replied in his letter that the family intended to include the instruments' name in the concert program but the concert organizer thought this inadvisable in view of the unsuccessful concerts given previously by the inventor himself on the saxhorns. John Distin added that the instruments had been given the name "saxhorns" by the Distin family, Sax having intended to call them "cylinder bugles". A further subject of dispute was the instrument that, according to the first letter, was offered by Sax to Prince Albert and which had the same mechanism as the saxhorns. John Distin stated that from their experience at Windsor Castle, where they tried this instrument, "it has not the same mechanism, but it is a very old German or Italian invention, called the "double cylinder", not manufactured by M. Sax. The instrument in question was obviously a bell-front saxhorn or flugelhorn with double-piston valves, two of which are shown in the Bagniet lithograph. It is known that Sax was making instruments with double-piston valves (Mitroulia and Myers, 2008, p.134), although his area of specialization was his own version of the Berlin valve. Distin's letter, although recognizing Sax as the inventor of the saxhorn in general, is written in a somewhat hostile tone. It is obvious that he does not consider Sax the inventor of the flugelhorn and he also challenges the fact that he was the maker. In his second letter to

The Musical World of February 17, 1845, John Distin writes:¹³

THE SAX HORN

To the Editor of the Musical World

6, Foley Place,
Monday Morning

Sir,

I shall be obliged by your correcting an error – probably a typographical one – in my letter on the subject of the Sax horns, inserted in last week’s Musical World. In the following lines will be seen the mistake, by referring to my letter: - “It is not the same mechanism, but a very old German or Italian invention, called the ‘double cylinder’, NOT manufactured by Mr. Sax.” The word NOT should have been BUT, which makes a very material difference. I wish to give Mr. Sax credit for all he deserves, and by correcting this in the next number, you will confer a favour on sir,

Yours, very truly,
JOHN DISTIN.

This second letter shows a conciliatory attitude. It is not known what caused the hostility between Sax and the Distins, but one factor could be that the Distins, very soon after they came back to Britain, registered on 1st January 1845 a design for a saxhorn with no mention being made of Sax (Fig. 2).¹⁴ It is possible though, since Sax was in Britain, that after the first two letters were published, Sax and the Distins met again and reconciled. This is only an assumption and cannot be supported by any other information, but in any case, they became Sax’s official agents in Britain the following year.

In 1845 the Distins set up their business in London selling printed music and musical instruments, although at that time they were only dealers and were not involved in any instrument making activity. They first started selling instruments from their residence in Manchester Street, Manchester Square, London. The earliest advertisement for this address known to us dates from May 1845.¹⁵ According to this advertisement the family only sold “registered saxhorns” at the time. As we have seen, Distin & Sons had already registered a design for a saxhorn in Britain. The instrument illustrated in the design is a four-valve contralto saxhorn equipped with four Berlin valves, in particular the version of the Berlin valve following the design of Sax. We are not aware of any bell-front contraltos made by Sax that follow this particular disposition (four valves placed in a row), but Sax’s influence is clear. It might have been this design that the Distins referred to when writing about making improvements to Sax’s own saxhorns. However, no surviving instrument known to us is made according to the Distins’ registered design. As far as we know, the family was not involved in any instrument making activity at the time and it is not known who was making the instruments sold at their premises at this early date. Although the probability of the maker being someone other than Sax is low, there is no confirmation from other sources.

The official collaboration between Sax and the Distin family commenced in 1846. In this year the Distins became Sax's only appointed agents for the sale of his instruments in Britain. The earliest advertisement stating this, which is known to us, is from August 1846 when it was announced that: "registered saxhorns, sax-cornets, horns, tubas and others" were offered for sale at the Distins' musical instrument warehouse at 31, Cranbourn Street in London.¹⁶ For a short time they held the saxhorn monopoly in Britain, and saxhorns were not yet made or officially imported by other British makers. From 1847 "saxtubas" were added in the list of instruments offered for sale. It should be noted that these are not Sax's later saxtubas made in the style of ancient Roman brass instruments (Bevan 2000, pp.114-119), but a term used by the Distins to denote upright saxhorns.

In April 1848 the eldest brother, George, died. The family stopped performing for a couple of weeks, and resumed in early May. According to John Distin's letter to *The Musical World*, the bass that was played by George was taken up by the brother who used to play second alto. John Distin had to rearrange all their music for a quartet with piano accompaniment. At first the concert reviews were not so favourable in reporting on the new arrangement of the music, but within a short time they resumed their former enthusiasm.

In 1849 the Distins travelled to the United States of America where they stayed and performed for several months. It is believed that they were so influential there that they were responsible for the popularisation of the term "saxhorn", which later was associated with the over-the-shoulder instruments that became known as "over-the-shoulder saxhorns". On at least one occasion they are known to have appeared in the same concert as the Dodworth family of the Dodworth Band, which later became known as the Dodworth Saxhorn Band and was one of the best-known American brass bands.¹⁷

In 1850 John Distin's son Henry took over the business and the firm was renamed Distin & Co.¹⁸ From 1851, Distin's "saxhorn depot" or "warehouse" began to be advertised as a "manufactory". The first advertisement for the "sax horn manufactory" in *The Musical World* dates from May 1851, a time when the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace had already opened.¹⁹ The fact that the Distins were now making their own instruments might have contravened their contract with Sax. Also, by the end of 1847 they were supplying cornets by Courtois, and (later) cornets by Besson, alongside cornets and other instruments from Sax's workshop. Moreover, in February 1851 we have the first concert announcements of the family in which it is stated that their "newly invented euphonic horns" had been used. Throughout 1851 the Distins advertised performances on their "patent euphonic horns" in concerts in which they also played saxhorns. After the end of 1851 references to the euphonic horns disappeared, showing that these instruments were short-lived, but the family continued using the saxhorns. We have no iconographical or other evidence of the identity of the euphonic horns, and there was definitely no patent taken out on such instruments. It is likely that the Distins tried to connect their name with something different from Sax's saxhorns, with which their audiences had become very familiar.

There were thus several reasons that might have led to the Distins' collaboration with Sax ending in 1851, a year when Sax was himself in London exhibiting at the Crystal Palace. It is often stated that this collaboration ended in 1853 when the franchise was transferred to Rudall Rose and Carte. In 1853 Rudall, Rose and Carte indeed became Sax's official agents in the United Kingdom, but Sax and the Distins terminated their agreement in 1851, when the obscure importer of music and musical instruments, Scipion Rousselot of Rousselot & Co., became the official agent of Sax in Britain for the following two years.

Documentary evidence shows that the firm was employing foreign workmen in the 1850s and 1860s. The Frenchman Eugene Dupont was the inventor of Distin's patent light valve, as we will see below. An article in *The Bristol Mercury* in 1856 shows Distin's policy and ethics as an employer.²⁰ A workman from Austria called Tischendorf sued Distin for breaching the terms of his contract. According to the article, Henry Distin had employed him in 1855 on the agreement that he would be paid in proportion to the amount of work he undertook. However, according to the workman, the amount of work he was given was greater than that agreed, thus his income should have increased. Henry Distin was dissatisfied with the initial agreement and, although it had been signed for seven years, he requested to enter a new agreement so that Tischendorf's income would be at a certain amount per week with an extra ten percent. The workman was dissatisfied and was absent from work one day so as to consult a lawyer. When he returned to the workshop, Theodore Distin (who represented his brother) informed him that due to his absence he would be fired. The court decided that Distin should pay damages.

There are two surviving documentary sources of information on the Distins' instrument production during the 1850s. The earlier is an undated brochure in the Adam Carse archive at the Horniman Museum, London, which we believe can be safely dated to between 1851 and 1853 (see Fig. 3). According to Carse, it was in 1850 when Distin's "saxhorn depot" started being advertised as a manufactory (Carse, 1945, p.199). As already mentioned, the present authors have found the earliest advertisements for the manufactory among the 1851 journal and newspaper advertisements. Also, the firm's 1857 catalogue discussed below published testimonies by various purchasers of Distin's instruments; the earliest of these testimonies date from 1851, and not 1850. The reasons for considering 1853 as the latest date for the brochure stem both from the instruments appearing on the brochure's first page, and the publications appearing on the second page. None of Distin's new improvements on instruments announced in 1854, such as Distin's cornet-à-pistons, or Distin's improved side-drums, appear on the brochure, although, it could be expected that if the brochure had been published in 1854 or soon after, at least some of the new improvements would have been included. Moreover, after the collaboration of the Distin quartet with a famous Hungarian band in 1853, some Hungarian Polkas were published by Distin & Co. and were advertised. None of these are included in the publications appearing on the second page of the Horniman Museum brochure. This brochure advertises almost exclusively brass instruments, with the exception of two clarinets. Hence we consider this brochure to date from 1851-53.

Although it most probably dates from the after the rift with Sax, the clear influence of Sax can be seen in the instruments offered for sale. Most models in the brochure are identical in design to Sax's brasswinds of the time, and the majority are equipped with Sax's version of the Berlin valve. However, the "sax" prefix is only used in the description of the bell-front saxhorns - all saxhorns in the bell-up form are called "tubas", although they are close copies of Sax's production. One such instrument is in the Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments (inventory number 4545, see Fig. 4), a contralto saxhorn in B-flat as it would be called following the nomenclature used by Sax, whereas according to the Distin brochure it would be called an "alto tuba". Other models with characteristics of Sax's designs (such as a cornet with the spring slide, a trombone "système Sax" and a cornet "système Sax") are not linked with Sax at all. The cornet "système Sax", of which there is an example at the Horniman Museum (inventory number 14.5.47/198), is described as "Infantry cornet-à-cylindres". In the 1850s, most probably in 1855, Henry Distin published Distin's *Tutor for alt-horn, tenor tuba and cornet à piston* (Distin, 1855). Although, the term saxhorn is not included in the title, it is included in the tutor's text, and the influence of Sax's method for the saxhorn and saxotromba, published in Paris a few years before Distin's tutor, is clear. Before the breach with Sax, the term "saxhorn" had accompanied most mentions of the Distin family in the press.

The second documentary source is the firm's complete catalogue published in 1857 (Distin, 1857). This advertises a full series of brass, woodwind and percussion instruments. It shows a complete revolution in the style of the instruments offered for sale. Sax-style Berlin valves are no longer used and have been replaced with Périnet valves. Many instruments are also offered with rotary valves. There is also a change in the nomenclature used. Bell-up instruments (such as that shown in Fig. 5) continue to be called "tubas" here, whereas bell-front instruments are named according to the type of valves with which they are equipped: instruments with Périnet valves are called "chromatic horns", and instruments with rotary-action valves (such as that shown in Fig. 6) are called "flügelhorns". Alterations in the wrap of the instruments' tubing show that efforts had been made by Henry Distin either to make improvements in the instruments or at least to deviate from the Sax style of brass instrument making.

The Distins' influence was extensive owing to their great musical successes, and the British public became very familiar with the saxhorns, which formed the cornerstone of the British brass band instrumentation. Many brass bands all over Britain started using the term "saxhorn" in their names and throughout the nineteenth century numerous mentions of various provincial "saxhorn" or even "saxtuba" bands can be found. The Distin family made sure that their name always appeared in conjunction with the most popular events. They were so well known as performers and instrument makers that their testimonies were even added to advertisements of various non-musical products. According to client letters cited in the 1857 catalogue, the Distins at the time supplied the above French-style and Sax-style instruments to a great number of military bands, military schools of music, and other amateur and professional bands, but Sax is not acknowledged anywhere; the Distins take the credit for being the great inventors.

In the 1862 London International Exhibition, Henry Distin was awarded a medal for the “good quality of his several brass instruments”.²¹ Pictures of Distin’s instruments were included in *Cassell’s Illustrated Exhibitor* that was published in 1862 and contained images of the principal objects exhibited in the London 1862 International Exhibition.²² Although the section devoted to Distin & Co. is titled “Mr. Distin’s saxhorns”, none of the instruments depicted are saxhorns: instead there are illustrated a Koenig horn, a ventill horn, a cornet (with an echo bell) and a saxophone, which according to the article were among the instruments exhibited by Distin.

As was the common practice of makers, the firm donated instruments to be given as prizes at brass band contests, which in return provided them with valuable publicity (see Fig. 7). A letter in the Distin archive in private possession (on loan to Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments) shows a darker side of the Distins’ publicity relating to brass band contests. The letter was sent by Henry Distin to the contest promoter Enderby Jackson (Fig. 8).²³ From Distin’s letter it appears that Enderby Jackson had been accused by the Distins’ main rival, Besson, of having accepted inducements in money or other form from the Distins for “advancing their interests”. Henry declares that in connection with the contests they had only presented the winners with instruments.

Patents and Registered Designs

The Distin family applied for a number of patents in the United Kingdom and France, and registered three designs in Britain. Some of the British patents did not reach the final stage and were thus not officially granted, but the patent applications were nevertheless published by the Patent Office. In France Henry Distin took out four patents corresponding to his British patents, as was a common practice at that time, since patents offered protection only within the borders of the country in which they had been registered. The reasons why some of Distins’ patents did not arrive at the final stage are not known, but it was not uncommon for patentees to change their minds during the procedure, mainly due to the high cost of a British patent. Only five of the patents applied for by members of the family and regarding musical instruments were finally taken out in Britain, but some of the patents not taken to the final stage in Britain were taken out in France. Registered designs in Britain offered a cheaper solution to British inventors and that is probably why the family chose to register the design for three of their “inventions” instead of applying for patents.

After the registered saxhorn design of 1845 mentioned previously, there is a gap of nine years in the Distins’ patenting and design registering activity. The Distins’ main preoccupation was the improvement of brass instruments, but two of their patents related to percussion instruments and one of the three registered designs was for “an improved clarinet”. The latter registered design has not been located, but probably referred to double-wall metal clarinets.²⁴ In Appendix II the metal clarinets other than ‘skeleton’ (single-wall) model are almost certainly double-wall clarinets.

The first patent Henry Distin applied for was in 1854, for “musical drums”. The improvements claimed were in the means of tightening, loosening, or regulating the heads of side drums, and means of easier and more secure holding by the performer (see Fig. 9). Although the patent never reached the final stage, such instruments in the firm’s 1857 catalogue were advertised as “Distin’s portable side drums, by letters patent” (Distin, 1857, No. 207, p.24).

Subsequently Henry applied for another patent relating to drums, in particular to orchestral kettledrums. This was applied for in 1856, but also did not reach the final stage. It claimed improvements in regulating the pitch of kettledrums by external rod tensioning (See Fig. 10). According to Distin’s 1857 catalogue, his “patent” tuning apparatus was noiseless and permitted tuning without a key (Distin, 1857, No 216, p.27). What brought the firm immense fame, as far as percussion instruments are concerned, was the monster gong drum manufactured in 1857 for the Handel festival of that year (see Fig. 11). Distin was commissioned to construct it by the festival’s committee. According to a magazine reporter the drum’s tone was

full and resounding, and more resembled that of a deep bourdon organ pipe, both in equality and continuance, than that generally obtained from an instrument of percussion. The vibration continues after the drum has been struck for nearly a minute, and for a longer period its pulsations are distinctly perceptible at a short distance.²⁵

Further information is also provided on the drum’s construction:

The diameter is between six and seven feet, the frame is said to contain 300 pieces of mahogany, adroitly jointed in a manner best adapted to secure strength and freedom from warping. The instrument is as much under tuning control as a smaller drum. It more resembles a tambourine in its external form than an ordinary drum, having but one head, this form being said to allow greater freedom of vibration.²⁶

Jeremy Montagu notes that, although this drum survived into the twentieth century, it was broken up by Boosey and Hawkes in the 1960s. It was offered to the Horniman Museum, London, but there was no space to accommodate it.²⁷

Another incompleated patent application was submitted in 1856. This was Henry Distin’s patent application for “improvements in cornets and other wind musical instruments” which was for the addition of a key near the bell of a valved brass instrument. The position of the hole and its diameter were to vary according to the size of the bell; the construction of the keys was also to vary (see Fig. 12). The objectives of this addition are not mentioned (the specification is very short). No surviving instrument by Distin with this particular device survives.

The first patent taken our successfully by Henry Distin was that regarding “Distin’s cornet-à-piston”, which was a French patent of 1854 (see Fig. 13). The cornet following the same ar-

rangement was registered in Britain as a design in the same year. The patent drawing shows a rotary-valve cornet with tension springs in barrels, constructed in such a way that (according to Distin) it can be easily demounted. The cleaning of the instrument and the replacement of the springs can be thus be performed by the player. Only one surviving instrument made according to this patent is known, a cornet (serial number 1105) in the Ontario Museum, Toronto (Webb, 1985, pp.52-53). Strangely, Distin's 1857 catalogue does not include any cornets following this design.

In 1855 Henry applied for a patent regarding "improvements in the means of rendering the ordinary field or regulation bugle chromatic."²⁸ Essentially, a valve attachment is added to the valveless bugle between the mouthpiece and the mouthpiece receiver. This idea is a direct copy of Sax's chromatic bugles, patented by Sax in France in 1849. Distin's attachment follows a slightly different design from that of Sax. Although Sax patented the idea five years prior to Distin, it was Distin who became known as the inventor of the "chromatic attachment", and similar instruments were offered for sale by the big firms of Boosey & Co. and Besson later in the nineteenth century.²⁹ Baines states that these instruments were used in chromatic bugle bands (Baines, 1993, p.176). According to the testimonies appended to the firm's 1857 catalogue, among the bands that adopted the chromatic bugle was the bugle band of the Royal Artillery. A picture of the band is also appended.

In the same year William Distin applied for an almost extravagant design for a rotary valve, in which a crank was added to the spindle actuating the rotor. We have no record of any surviving instrument with this type of valve. This was William's only patent application regarding musical instruments; however, he appears to have been involved in non-musical instrument patents, such as his 1856 patent regarding improvements in pipes for smoking.³⁰

In 1858 Henry took out a patent for the "centre bell instruments" (see Fig. 14).³¹ The instruments' bell and valve section are placed within the circumference of a circle formed by the instrument's tubing. This shape could be applied to cornets and all sizes of saxhorn; the only actual advantage mentioned in the patent specification is the portability and greater ease with which these instruments could be played. No surviving example of Distin's "patent centre-bell" instrument is known to the authors, and it is not known if these instruments were ever produced commercially.

In 1861 Henry applied for another patent, this time regarding an even more peculiar design.³² He combined a trumpet and a bugle by applying an additional tubing to the bugle (see Fig. 15).³³ There were two mouthpiece receivers and, depending on which one is used, the corresponding tubing is in use or isolated. Duplex instruments were known long before Distin's patent and as far as we know this design did not attract any particular interest. Again no extant instrument following this design is known to the authors.³⁴ What is known, though, is a tenor saxhorn with seven bells that was exhibited in the London 1890 Military Exhibition.³⁵ The instrument had six ascending valves made according to the independent system valve of Sax and each valve, when operated, engaged the corresponding tubing and

bell. The instrument seems to be exact copy of Sax's multiple bell instruments patented in 1851, and the only differentiation seems to be the addition of an echo bell that could be engaged with an additional valve.³⁶

One of the inventions that made Distin's name even more widely known was that of the "light valve". The patent was taken out in 1864 and through it Distin announced a noiseless valve, the one that later became known as the "patent light valve" which was very successful (see Fig. 16). The pistons of these valves were made of only one layer of brass and the *coquilles* were silver soldered in place.

According to later testimonies, Eugene Dupont, one of Distin's foremen, was the actual inventor of the "patent light valve", although his name is not mentioned at all in the actual patent. A year after the 1864 British patent, in 1865, Distin and Dupont took out a patent in France on the same specifications, with additional valve developments. It is worth wondering why Distin did not include Dupont's name in the original British patent, whereas he did so in the subsequent French patent. Dupont was France's secretary of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association. There is a surviving letter by Dupont to another member of the council regarding a meeting of the association in London, written on letter-head paper of Distin & Co (Marx and Engels, 2002, p.1192).

It was claimed by Henry Distin's later rivals that his reputation as a fine instrument maker was due to Dupont's skills. This is apparent in two pieces of correspondence published in *Trumpet Notes*.³⁷ It appears that Dupont, right after Distin's business was sold to Boosey & Co., wrote to them asking for some kind of credit for his work with Distin over the past years. Boosey & Co. recognized his skills as an inventor and manufacturer and proposed to keep him in their employment with substantial pay for his contribution to new inventions. However, for all credits regarding his past employment with Henry Distin they referred him to Distin himself.

As in the case of William Distin, Henry also applied for a patent not relevant to musical instruments. In 1860, together with Augustus Henry Siebe (a clock and watch maker), his application concerned a "metropede" (a metronome).

Distin's ventril horns

Another group of instruments with which the Distins' name is connected, is that of the ventril horns. Ventril horns were intermediate bore instruments made in circular shape with the bell pointing up (see Fig. 17). Distin never took out a patent for the ventril horn, and it is an irony that this unpatented product became one of his more successful ones. Experiments with brass instruments in circular shape were common in this period: most makers were making intermediate bore profile instruments in circular form with various directions of the bell, mainly to imitate the shape of the french horn. The earliest references to Distin's ventril horns

date from September 1859, when the first concert announcements for Distin's Ventil Horn Union appear. There is also a surviving image in private ownership from a stereoscopic image card depicting the members of the union (Fig. 18). According to the concert announcements, the band's instruments ranged from the "soprano" to the "double bass" ventil horn and it consisted of the following members:

- Solo alto ventil horn – M. Duhem
- Solo soprano ventil horn – Mr. West
- Second alto ventil horn – Mr. Prospère, jun.
- Solo tenor ventil horn – Mr. H. Distin
- First tenor ventil horn – Herr Angyal
- Second tenor ventil horn – Mr. W. S. Davies
- Solo bass ventil horn – Mr. Saunders
- Contrabass ventil horn – Herr Kurutz
- Double contrabass ventil horn – Herr Krili

A second surviving image depicting a five-member ensemble with ventil horns³⁸ has been mistakenly thought to be the Distin family.

Cornets from the Distin workshop

Most of the surviving instruments coming from the Distin workshop are cornets. In general, after studying the family's history in relation to musical instrument making, it is obvious that the cornet had a central part in their production. From 1850 the Distins offered night classes for cornet ensembles in their establishment in Cranbourn Street.³⁹ In both the early brochure and the 1857 catalogue there is an abundance of cornet models offered for sale.

Jules Levy, the famous cornetist, reveals in 1883, during the conflict between the American makers Conn and Pepper, the real reasons why in 1865 he agreed to advertise Distin's cornets. He admits that:

In 1865 when Distin was a small manufacturer in London, I tried some of his instruments and found them good, because the most parts of them were made in his establishment, and were exact copies of the celebrated Courtois (of Paris) cornet. At that time Distin offered me several inducements to perform on and recommend his cornets, which I accepted and if he had not made them piece by piece in exact imitation of Courtois, I could not have done so, as I don't believe him capable of any ingenious ideas. However, I knew then, at that time, 1865, that no matter where, or how he copied the instrument that it was made in Newport street, London, England. I continued using his cornet for two seasons, until the year 1867, when I went back to my first love, the Courtois cornet, which I found superior to Distin's in every shape and form, as well as in tune and tone.⁴⁰

Since at this time Henry Distin was associated with Pepper and this admission was published in the Conn house magazine, it might not be free from bias.

In addition to the previous testimony accusing Distin of copying instruments from the Parisian maker Courtois, as evidence shows that he previously did with Sax, it is known that he also imported some of his instruments from Paris, even in the 1860s, although the exact numbers of imports and of instruments made in his own factory are not known. He also imported at least some of his valve sections, and possibly other instrument parts from Paris. We know that he was among the clientele of the Parisian valve maker Drouelle in the 1850s.⁴¹ His connection with Drouelle is also shown by the fact that Drouelle deposited Distin and Dupont's patent application at the Intellectual Property Office in 1865. The exact period in which Distin was importing his valves is not known, but we know he was latterly making at least some of his valves in his own workshop. Archival documents from the business immediately after it was bought by Boosey show that there were two valve makers among the workforce.

The tenor euphonion

A unique instrument, now in the Horniman Museum, London, is a wide-bore tenor horn (Fig. 19), probably similar to the instruments described in the stockbooks as "tenor euphonions". A tenor instrument of similar dimensions was included in Adolphe Sax's 1862 patent and described by Sax "alto proportions nouvelles". Sax provides some bore widths of the new instrument, and although the copy of the patent available to the public is not very clear, some diameters can be deciphered, plotted, and then compared with Distin's tenor euphonion. Although we are missing a critical measurement of Sax's mouthpipe, it can be observed that overall the instruments' bore profiles are close. Although, in most cases the Distins were copying Sax, in this case Distin's instrument dates from c. 1856-57, and Sax's patent was subsequent (1862).

Monster instrument

In addition to the monster drum mentioned earlier, it is known that Distin had manufactured at least one subcontrabass bombardon. There are a few surviving sub-contrabass tubas,⁴² but Distin's is not extant. It was exhibited at the 1890 London Royal Military Exhibition. Day reports that this B-flat "monster model" had been made for use in Distin's *Flugel Horn Union* in 1862 (exhibition number 413) (Day, 1891, p.213). It appears that once again Distin was following Adolphe Sax's footsteps: Sax had already in the 1850 made and exhibited sub-contrabass saxhorns in 26-ft E-flat and 36-ft B-flat.

1868-1874

Henry Distin sold his flourishing instrument business to Boosey & Company in June 1868, on the condition that he would never make any musical instruments within 100 miles of London. Boosey had been one of his main customers. No factory records from before the sale survive. However, almost complete documentation exists of the production of the factory under the ownership of Boosey & Co, and partial documentation of the sales of instruments, in Workshop Order Books and Stock Books now in the care of the Horniman Museum, London. It is clear that under Boosey ownership, the Distin business continued as an autonomous concern for six years until 1874, when the retail outlets of Distin & Co in Great Newport Street, and of Boosey & Co in Holles Street, were both replaced by new retail premises in Regent Street. In this period the instruments continued to be stamped with the Distin & Co name and address, even if they were sold by Boosey & Co. (Such was the reputation of Distin instruments that the Distin name continued to be part of the Boosey trademark for many years after.) Study of the production and sales in the period just after the sale thus provide a good indication of the manufacturing practices of Henry Distin.

In London's second annual exhibition of 1872 Distin & Co., and Boosey & Co., exhibited separately. The Journal of the Society of Arts mentions that Messrs. Distin & Co., exhibited besides a number of instruments, "various portions of pistons and tubes, in process of manufacture".⁴³ Mention is made of Distin's ballad horn and tenor cor. The latter was claimed to combine the mellow tone of the French horn with the fullness of the tenor, and used the cornet fingering. It is noted that the low prices of Distin's instruments make them affordable by school bands, factory bands, students and others. Regarding Boosey & Co., and their exhibits, the Journal mentioned that only a small number of instruments were shown.⁴⁴

Although we know that Henry Distin lived in Belgium for seven years after 1868, it is not known to what extent he and other members of his family were involved in the Boosey & Co. business. The ballad horn that was marketed from 1869 was promoted as Distin's ballad horn, although at the time of its development and appearance the business had already been sold and the factory was managed by David James Blaikley. On the other hand, Theodore Distin in 1872 published a method for the ballad horn.

Appendix II gives the inventory of stock held by the business at 15th June 1868 and the average annual production of the factory (an average for the calendar years 1871 and 1872). The figures are broken down by instrument type. The stock in hand at 15 June 1868 of course indicates the instruments that Distin had not sold, either because of lack of demand or because they had been made for stock soon before the sale of the business. The individual entries show that Distin had continued to import instruments. Nineteen of the cornets are described as "French make", as are six of the soprano saxhorns; one tenor flugel horn is of "German make". Nevertheless, it is clear that most of the stock was made in the Distin factory.

It is safe to assume that the organization of work at the Great Newport Street factory did

not change significantly until it was closed in 1876 (when the new Boosey factory at Stanhope Place was built). The workforce would not have changed immediately either. Although the total number of employees will have been much larger, the making of brass instruments was assigned (in 1870) to seven makers: Barnes, Bauer, Cook, Hoyer, Korb, Kurzendorfer, and Mackay. Assistants or apprentices were usually attached to these makers, and were occasionally entrusted to make bugles, hunting horns and other simple items. There were only two valve makers: Derkinderen (who made large batches of valve clusters for standard instruments) and Rockaerts (who made valves for the less common models). The workmen at any one time would have had several jobs in hand. Some jobs (presumably to meet orders) would speed through from being given out to being charged, other jobs (presumably making instruments for stock) took longer to complete.

A journal of surviving Distin London instruments brass instruments, with archival and catalogue data is maintained by one of the authors on the Web at <http://www.galpinsociety.org/gddj.html>

Inscriptions on Distin instruments

Interpreting the inscriptions on Distin instruments is not straightforward. Some instruments have serial numbers, others do not. From the stock books it is clear that Henry Distin used serial numbers both to organize stock records and to organize production. The actual numbers stamped on instruments probably mostly reflect production numbers, but at least the later numbers were used for both purposes. Instruments without serial numbers were probably imported. There were two Cranbourn Street addresses used in inscriptions. No. 29 appears only on a very early soprano saxhorn, bearing Adolphe Sax's serial number (2047), which suggests a date of 1845. No. 31 Cranbourn Street is stamped on later instruments up to circa 1857. According to the firm's advertisements in *The Musical World*, it was in autumn 1846 that the address changed from 29 to 31 Cranbourn Street. The trade catalogue issued in 1857 contains an exaggerated view of the factory (Fig. 20), which includes both the Cranbourn Street address and the nearby Great Newport Street address, which was stamped on later instruments. Two instruments (serial numbers 2684 and 2698) are stamped with both addresses. This early sequence of serial numbers, often associated with "CLS 1", appears to be a sequence used from circa 1850-51 until circa 1860-61, the highest recorded number on a surviving instrument being 5534. From then until the mid 1860s both valve clusters and instruments were given the same serial number in a new sequence; extant instruments have these numbers ranging from 1488 to 9288, suggesting an increase in production in the 1860s. From just before the sale of the business a new system was introduced (which would be continued by Boosey & Hawkes until circa 1950) with valve clusters given their own numbers continuing the sequence of the early 1860s. From the mid 1860s, cornets were given separate numbers starting from 10,000, and other instruments were numbered from 20,000. These two instrument number sequences were used until 1874 when they were replaced by a single Boosey & Co sequence for instruments.

An early trademark of an upper-case “D” with “DISTIN” vertically in the stem and “LONDON” vertically in the bow was stamped on bells from the early to mid 1850s until circa 1860-61 in conjunction with the early sequence of serial numbers. A trademark of words forming an ellipse “DISTIN * LONDON *” with “MAKER” inside⁴⁶ was stamped on piston valves from circa 1860-61 until 1874 in conjunction with serial numbers on valve clusters. A late trademark of a trumpet with a banner incorporating “DISTIN”⁴⁷ was stamped on bells from 1865 or soon after until 1874. Many instruments from the Distin factory were silver-plated; a few were made of massive silver and were hallmarked in London with the initials “HD”.

Conclusion

The Distin family is today unknown to most people. However, this family ensemble, and later family business of musical instrument making, was seminal in establishing the nineteenth century brass instrument making tradition in Britain. Their concerts were so influential that their French imports, initially from Sax’s workshop and later from elsewhere, became very popular. However, their own inventing activity and instrument production shows little evidence of ingenuity, since most of their products were either copied or influenced by French makers. The promotion and marketing operations were not always straightforward and their ethics as employers were sometimes dubious. However, the result was the development of fast growing instrument making businesses in Britain and the conception and manufacture of an astonishing diversity of designs that advanced the development of brasswinds.

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Tony Bingham for access to archival documents.

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Endnotes

- 1 John Henry Distin was born in 1798 in Plympton, Devon, England, and died in July 1863. His first son, George Distin was born in 1818 and died in 1848. Henry Distin was born in 1819 and died in 1903. William Distin died in 1884. Theodore Distin was born in 1823 and died in 1893. See Adam Carse Archive, Horniman Museum London, and “Death of Theodore Distin” *The Era* 2848 (April 1893).

- 2 "The Famed Distin Family. Career of the Great Saxhorn Quintet", *The Sunday Times*, New York, August 7th, 1881.
- 3 op. cit.
- 4 Adam Carse reports that the family were probably performing before 1837 but no further information is known (Carse, 1945, p.195).
- 5 Adam Carse reports that the family were probably performing before 1837 but no further information is known (Carse, 1945, p.195).
- 6 Mrs. Distin's maiden name was Loder, and she was the daughter of the violinist John Loder. See "Death of Theodore Distin" *The Era* 2848 (April 1893).
- 7 See "Death of Mrs. Theodore Distin" *The Era* 1283 (April 26, 1863).
- 8 op. cit.
- 9 "News of the day" *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (October 18, 1839).
- 10 "Advertisements" *The Musical World* 32:45 (November 1854), p. 750.
- 11 "The Famed Distin Family. Career of the Great Saxhorn Quintet", *The Sunday Times*, New York, August 7th, 1881.
- 12 "Original correspondence" *The Musical World* 20: 4 (January 23, 1845), pp. 41-42.
- 13 "Original correspondence" *The Musical World* 20:8 (February 20, 1845), p. 90.
- 14 "Design for a Sax Horn (a musical wind instrument)" registered to Messrs. Distin of London (BT 45/02), The National Archives, United Kingdom.
- 15 "Advertisements" *The Musical World* 20:21 (May 22, 1845), p. 250.
- 16 *The Musical World* 21:31, (August 1, 1846), p. 368.
- 17 "The Distins in America" *The Musical World* 24:27 (July 7, 1849), p. 420.
- 18 An amusing if apocryphal story describing Henry Distin's chutzpah in launching his Cranbourn Street business is related by Algernon Rose (Rose, 1995, pp.211-212).
- 19 *The Musical World*, 28 no. 21 (May 1851): 334.
- 20 "Tischendorf v. Distin" *The Bristol Mercury* 3438 (February 9, 1856).
- 21 "Musical Instruments in the International Exhibition" *The Musical Standard* 1:10, (December 1862), p. 132.
- 22 *Cassell's Illustrated Exhibitor*, 1862 (London: Cassell, Peter & Galpin, La Belle Sauvage Yard, Ludgate Hill, and New York: Park Buildings, 1862), p. 91.
- 23 Letter of Henry Distin to Enderby Jackson, August 21, 1863.
- 24 Two silverplated double-wall Distin clarinets (without serial numbers) are in the Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments: one in high E-flat (inventory number 3259) and one in B-flat (inventory number 3829).
- 25 "Literary Miscellanis" *The Eclectic Magazine of foreign literature, science and art* vol. XLI No. 3 (July 1857), p. 431.
- 26 op. cit.
- 27 For more information and for a twentieth-century picture of the monster drum see Montagu (2002, pp.131-32).
- 28 British letters patent No. 1465 for "improvements in the means of rendering the ordinary field or regulation bugle chromatic" (June 26, 1855) by Henry John Distin.
- 29 For more see Mitroulia and Myers, (2008, p.108).
- 30 British letters patent No. 2688 for "improvements in pipes for smoking" (January 3, 1856) by William Alfred Distin.

- 31 British letters patent No. 2017 for “improvements in cornets and other musical wind instruments” (September 6, 1858) by Henry John Distin.
- 32 British letters patent No. 2559 for “improvements in metal musical wind instruments” by Henry John Distin (October 14, 1861).
- 33 For reasons unknown just four days after the patent application, Henry Distin, applied for another patent for “improvements in metal wind instruments”. The patent specification, although considerably shorter, regards the same subject. However, this second patent application never reached the final stage. Provisional specification No. 2592 by Henry John Distin, applied for in October 18, 1861.
- 34 Two such instruments are mentioned in the Boosey & Co. stockbooks. See Appendix II.
- 35 Item number 446 (Day, 1891, pp.223-224).
- 36 Day states that the particular instrument cost Distin £400 in experiments and workmanship.
- 37 *Trumpet Notes* 7:17 (October 10, 1883), pp. 6-16.
- 38 Reproduced in Geiringer (1943, Plate LXII). The error was not repeated in the 2nd edition.
- 39 “Advertisements” *The Musical World* 25:11 (March 16, 1850), p. 172.
- 40 *Trumpet Notes*, October 10, 1883, 7: 17, p. 16.
- 41 See *Affaire Drouelle contre Sax. Renvoi devant la Cour impériale de Rouen après cassation*, (Paris : impr. Renou et Maulde, 1866), p. 5, and Mitroulia et al. (2006, pp.217-229).
- 42 Listed in Bevan (2000), p.279).
- 43 “Musical Instruments” *The Society of Arts Journal* 20 (November 1871-November 1872), pp. 892-93.
- 44 op. cit.
- 45 Illustrated in Myers (2002, p.415).
- 46 Illustrated, *ibid* p.416.
- 47 Illustrated, *ibid*, p.417.

Appendices

- I. List of some of the concerts given by the Distin family with details of the instruments reported to have been used.
- II. List of instruments in the stock of Distin & Co at the time of the purchase of the firm by Boosey & Co and of instruments made in the Distin & Co factory in the years 1870-71 (annual average). Metal woodwind instruments are described and brass, german silver, or electroplated. Wooden woodwind instruments are described as boxwood, cocoa, or ebony.

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