Treble, duet, and tenor-treble concertinas. L-R: Dick Lothhouse, Bernie Evans, and Alan Finch in a shanty session at Expo 74 in Spokane.

CONCERTINAS

This issue's article on the revival of interest in concertinas was prepared by Dick Lothhouse, a folk music enthusiast, a founder-member of the Rocky Mountain Folk Club, and a performer. Dick plays a variety of bellows-type instruments and has built a beautiful set of Northumbrian pipes, which he also plays.

Mansel Davies

A few years ago there was a great revival of interest in the concertina, in its various forms. This happened mostly in Britain, and took a while to spread to Canada, partly because of the scarcity of instruments here. There may now be a few people who would like to know a little more about the instrument.

First, a bit of heavy technical stuff. Each note is produced by a thin metal reed mounted in a frame, vibrating as air is forced from one side to the other. The longer the reed, the lower the note. The reed must make a close fit with its frame, and on a good concertina they are hand-made - all ninety-six of them. Each button on the keyboard is connected to a valve to allow air through a particular reed frame. Accordions have about three reeds per note, tuned slightly apart to give a vibrato effect, but the concertina sounds only one reed for
each note. This gives it a “pure” tone, quite distinct from that of the accordion.

The English concertina was invented in 1829 by Sir Charles Wheatstone, and plays the same note pushing or pulling the bellows - double action, like the piano accordion. The keyboards are laid out so that all the notes on the lines of the stave are played by the left hand and those in the spaces by the right. It takes both hands to play the melody; you don’t have treble on one side and base on the other. This may sound strange, but it facilitates playing fast runs - great for Irish reels and suchlike. Chords are also quite convenient. It’s easy to harmonise a tune in thirds or sixths but not so easy to add a base line. Treble and tenor concertinas are most widely used in folk music, but baritone and even bass can be used for song accompaniment or band playing. An English-system concertina is currently available, made by Bastari of Italy. It does not sound as well as the original, but is good for the price.

German concertinas have always been cheaply made, with poor sound and short life. They have only two rows of buttons, and play different notes pushing and pulling - a single action, like a harmonica or small button-accordion. This design was improved on by George Jones in 1851 to form the Anglo-German, and he soon added a third row of notes to give the Anglo-chromatic. The “Anglo” then became the great folk instrument of the rest of the century, while the English was more widely accepted in “posh” society. All types of concertina, along with other instruments, began to lose popularity towards the 1930’s, due largely to the effects of canned music, radio, and later T.V. Anglos are excellent for reels, jigs and other dance music, and also for song accompaniment. The Anglo is also more suitable to playing by ear, while the English is better adapted to playing from music. Melody is usually played by the right hand on an Anglo while a vampin accompaniment is added by the left.

An instrumental virtuoso might be more interested in the various Duet systems. These have a full chromatic scale on the right hand for playing the melody and another one an octave or so lower on the left for chord accompaniment. Double action again, but the chords are not preset like on an accordion - you have to make them yourself, piano-fashion. The Triumph or Crane Duet is easier to learn than the McCann or Jeffries systems, so don’t buy one without looking into it carefully.

The player who has made the most impact with a concertina here and elsewhere is undoubtedly Alistair Anderson. Ali uses the English system, and plays mostly fast unaccompanied dance tunes. He also plays ragtime on a tenor-treble, putting in all the accompaniment. The Boys of the Lough use the English to great effect, as does Liam Clancy. Tom Connolly of Drumheller, Alberta, still plays the Wheatstone English he bought new in Scotland in 1918. I only know one Duet player in Canda - Bernie Evans of Invermere, B.C. - and one Anglo player - Don McVea of Regina. The concertina playing on the Chieftan’s records is Anglo.

How do you get hold of a concertina? There are not too many on
sale in Canada, but Lark in the Morning in California usually have some for $700 or more. Prices are almost that high in England now for really good instruments, but there are cheaper ones around for much less. The makes to look for are Wheatstone, Jeffries, Crabb, Shakespeare, and Lachenal (if in good condition). I have some addresses of dealers for anyone wanting to import a concertina. You wouldn’t pay duty, only sales tax, and possibly not even that on an old instrument. One way out is to buy a new Bastari “English” from Washington D.C. for about $200. The Bastari Anglo costs a bit less. Duets are easy to get in England, while Anglos are becoming more popular again, and are therefore getting scarce.

There is an International Concertina Association based in London, going in mostly for classical music. Perhaps a Canadian group could be formed, slanted towards folk music. I’d be glad to hear from anyone interested in concertinas at 2949 Toronto Crescent, N.W. Calgary, Alberta, T2N 3W4.

Dick Lofthouse

**SOURCES OF CONCERTINAS**

“Lark in the Morning”
45080 Little Lake St.,
Mendocino, Ca. 95460

Oliver W. Heatwole
3900 Sixteenth St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20011

**ATTENTION: LUTHIERS & REPAIRPERSONS**

We wish to compile and publish a cross-Canada listing of stringed instrument builders and repairpersons early next year in the *Bulletin*. We are primarily seeking individual luthiers and repairmen working in their own shops as opposed to large retail outlets. If you are involved in these pursuits and would like to be included in this listing, please call or write to one of the addresses below, being sure to include your address, phone number, business hours, whether you build or repair or both, and indicate to what extent you do: decorative work, refinishing, major reconstruction and restoration, and whatever else you might care to add. Please respond as soon as possible and we look forward to hearing from you.

Mansel Davies, Box 262, Bragg Creek, Alta. T0L 0K0 (403) 949-2444.
Bruce Martin, 1201 Bowness Rd. N.W., Calgary Alta, T2N 3J6, (403) 283-5786.

**MARKETPLACE ADS**

English system Concertina - Baritone Model by Bastari (3 Octave range) - Original Mint Condition plus excellent case - U.S. price $275 - offered for $200. Dick Lofthouse, 2949 Toronto Cres, N.W., Calgary, Alta. T2N 3W4